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Fantasy

READER No. 4

The ARRHENIUS HORROR

By P. Schuyler Miller

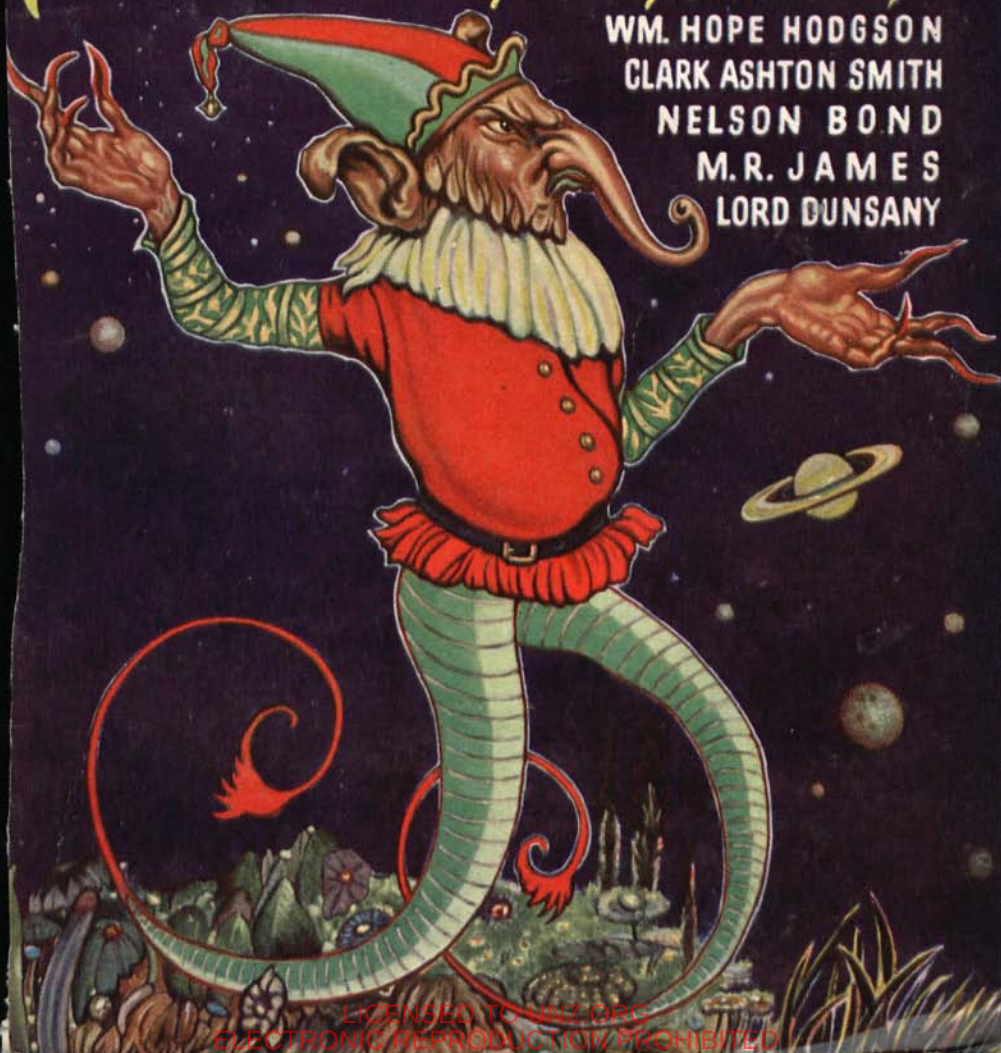
WM. HOPE HODGSON

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

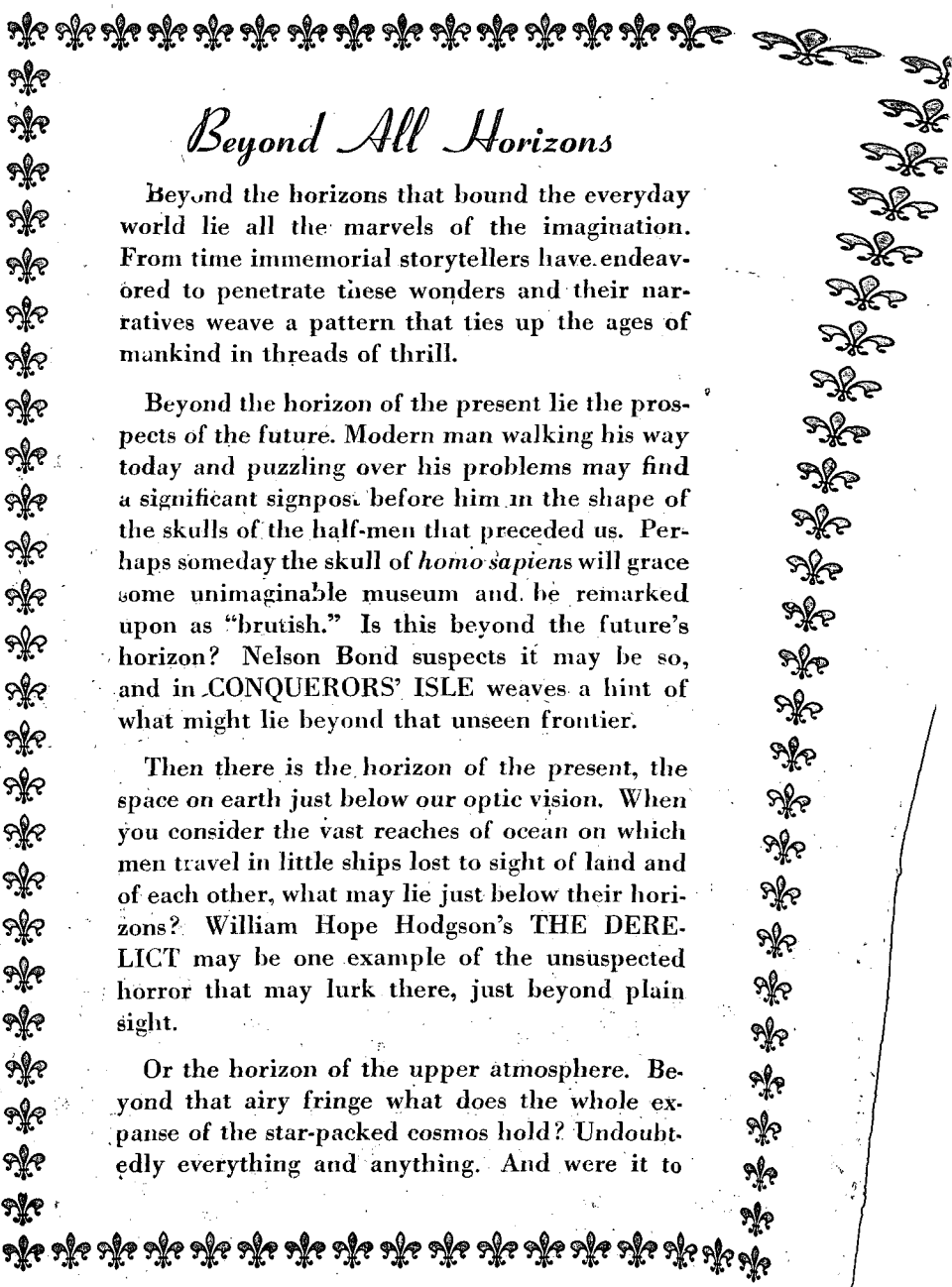
NELSON BOND

M. R. JAMES

LORD DUNSANY



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Beyond All Horizons

Beyond the horizons that bound the everyday world lie all the marvels of the imagination. From time immemorial storytellers have endeavored to penetrate these wonders and their narratives weave a pattern that ties up the ages of mankind in threads of thrill.

Beyond the horizon of the present lie the prospects of the future. Modern man walking his way today and puzzling over his problems may find a significant signpost before him in the shape of the skulls of the half-men that preceded us. Perhaps someday the skull of *homo sapiens* will grace some unimaginable museum and be remarked upon as "brutish." Is this beyond the future's horizon? Nelson Bond suspects it may be so, and in *CONQUERORS' ISLE* weaves a hint of what might lie beyond that unseen frontier.

Then there is the horizon of the present, the space on earth just below our optic vision. When you consider the vast reaches of ocean on which men travel in little ships lost to sight of land and of each other, what may lie just below their horizons? William Hope Hodgson's *THE DERE-LICT* may be one example of the unsuspected horror that may lurk there, just beyond plain sight.

Or the horizon of the upper atmosphere. Beyond that airy fringe what does the whole expanse of the star-packed cosmos hold? Undoubtedly everything and anything. And were it to

come down to meet us as in P. Schuyler Miller's **THE ARRHENIUS HORROR**, borne on wings of pure light, or whether our minds soar up to meet it as in Clark Ashton Smith's tale of **THE PLANET OF THE DEAD**, it is there for the imagining—and someday for the seeing.

Or the horizon of the past, when we ourselves were not, what may have been to cause us wonder? Ruins tell us little really, but in **A WARNING TO THE CURIOUS**, the antiquary, M. R. James, draws something from such ruins that will give us pause.

Those curious tales, **THE HOLLOW MAN** by Thomas Burke and **THE MAN UPSTAIRS** by Ray Bradbury, may give hints of untold frontiers moving about in our very midst, mingling with us in crowds, sitting in homes and stores. And we should not fail to mention Lord Dunsany's legend of **THE HOARD OF THE GIBBELINS** as an instance of casting loose all horizons.

The **AVON FANTASY READER** transcends all these boundaries in bringing to you stories such as the above. Whether they be science-fiction, as some are, or pure fantasy, or ghostly tales, all are selected for their memorable qualities both in literary value and imaginative impact. Cross the boundary of our pages and see for yourself.

—DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

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AVON
FANTASY READER

NO. 4

Edited By
DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

THOMAS BURKE • P. SCHUYLER MILLER

LORD DUNSANY • RAY BRADBURY

CLARK ASHTON SMITH • NELSON BOND

M. R. JAMES • A. E. VAN VOGT

WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON

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AVON FANTASY READER: No. 4

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In these days of uranium research it is interesting to speculate on some of the possible results of this atomic pioneering. Life itself and the secret of life may lie in the direction in which science is now secretly progressing. In the table of elements occurs a certain pattern to the reactions and powers of chemical bodies, a pattern that permits the suspicion that somewhere a compound may be struck having the kind of reaction we now assign solely to the carbon compound we call protoplasm. P. Schuyler Miller couples this chemical possibility with the logical astronomical hypothesis of a noted Scandinavian physicist to form the base of as startling a story as any reader of science-fiction could demand.

The Arrhenius Horror

by P. Schuyler Miller

K

ELVIN."—"Absolute."

"Life."—"Death."

"Sleep."—"Tired."

"Earth."—"Doom."

"Ground."—"Soil."

"Arrhenius."—"Ion."

"Well!" exclaimed the psychoanalyst. "I thought you were perfectly normal—the most normal man I ever met. You went through the regular word-association tests like the most level-headed of men—not an important slip anywhere! And then I polish you off with a few more words—more or less haphazard ones—and I find this! *Why* should 'earth' bring out 'doom' like a jack-in-the box, in half a second under your norm, while old 'Arrhenius' takes four seconds and a half, very nearly twice your normal reaction time, to produce 'ion'? I give you 'Kelvin,' and like a good, normal chemist you reply with his absolute scale of temperature. And then, when I tack 'Arrhenius' on the end of the list, for no particular reason, it takes you, a chemist, double your normal time to give me his ionic theory—one of the fundamental con-

cepts of modern science! There's no doubt about it now; this is what has been keeping you on edge for the last two years, but, *why?* Come, I'm your doctor, just now, but I'm your friend as well, and an old one; too. Tell me what Arrhenius does mean to you."

"You're right," his patient replied, "Arrhenius doesn't mean 'ion' to me—not right off. It means Life—Life spores! God knows I have reason to make that association, rather than any other, but any man who goes into Africa with a companion, and comes out alone, with a handful of crystals and a mad story, learns to repress the emotions that are surging at his heart!

"You remember Tom Gillian—a fresh when we were seniors? He went in for chemistry, like me, but he had money to burn, and he went in for travel, too. Then one day, as I was droning away at my crucibles, he breezed in, bronzed like a Rodin figure. He walloped me on the shoulder, just the way he used to do in the old days.

"'Bill,' he said, 'you have a holiday coming. I've found radium, and plenty of it, and you're the man who is going to come out with me and check my tests on the pitchblende—expenses paid, at an expert's salary! How about it?'

"'You mean the Company is sending me, with you?'

"'Nothing but!' he replied. 'You are going to *be* the Company in an area as big as Texas, with Pennsylvania thrown in, and with less people than Greenland. Bill, I've hit on a deposit of radium ore that will make your eyes stick out! We'll have to fly it out, but if you check me, the Company is back of us, and we'll go halves on the job. Right?'

"'Right enough!' I answered. 'But where is this ore?'

"'Ye gods! Didn't I tell you? It's in Africa, way off in the desert where no one but a half-wit white man would think of going. It's a whale of a place, Bill! "Hell's Garden" I call it—just the sort of place Rider Haggard would have picked to raise a new race of fire-eaters. It's a big extinct crater, or maybe a meteor splash with a rim like the Andes and a desert plateau for miles around that has Death Valley on the run. Then you climb up and up to a narrow pass under the black cliffs and look down into the crater! "Hell's Garden!" It's mostly marsh—the shallow, grown-up marsh that you read about, all full of great blue-green reeds and thick black water, with an island in the center where the out-crop is. They're like fossils, those reeds, chuck full of silica. A man could scratch glass with them, with no trouble at all. Well, you'll see it all inside of a year or less. If you think up a better name for the place, it's yours!'

"And so a year came, and went, and at last I found myself beside Tom at the topmost pinnacle of shattered rock that had thrust up in an enormous barrier out of the dead white heat of the desert. Behind me, long white dunes and bouldered stream beds writhed and leapt under the burning sun. About me, black crags thrust up in a jagged maze of rocks, into the pale sky. Below me lay the crater, 'Hell's Garden.'

"Down the slow slope from the abrupt foot of the barrier range ran a weird and wonderful tangle of bush and grass-tuft and squat tree, crowding up in triumph from the black sand among the black ledges. Thorn-tree and sword-grass and other plants that no man had seen elsewhere—parts of this unearthly monument that was the sanctuary, the stronghold of Radium, master of modern Man! Dull grey or slatey green was their foliage, but from every gnarled and twisted bough sprang a miracle of burning color—raw red and golden and royal purple—the blossoms of Hell's Garden.

"Then, as they sloped down and out into the crater's heart, they changed—became a sea of long grey-green grasses surging and billowing in the hot wind that seeped in through the guardian ranges from the outer desert, more than man-high and keen-edged as a steeled blade. And still farther, beyond them all, were the great reeds. Perhaps in a Carboniferous age they had been natural, but here and now they gave a strange feeling of isolation, as of another planet. Slender as a man's thumb, yet thrice a man's height from water to fronded tips, they sprang from the oily black mire of the swamp. Tall and slender, yet stiff and flinty as a forest of quartz spires, as hard as, and tougher than, the silica that was in them, forming a wall to dull the sharpest blade—a wall of blue-green between us and the dull black pinnacle on the horizon—our goal. And as I stood, I heard the voice of Hell's Garden—a threefold voice, of the sough of weary winds through a net of leafy boughs, of a hushed whisper of hurrying breezes in the grasses, keen as their lurking blades, and a voice of the great reeds, like nothing I had heard or imagined, save only the rattle of clean-picked bones on a rotting gibbet, dry and sinister, and harsh with a sort of lurking softness in it, with a shrill whine of crystal stroking crystal that ran through the clatter. Dwarfed tree and treacherous grass and chattering reed—the denizens of Hell's Garden!

"Tom was speaking. 'There's more to it than this,' he said, 'but the main show won't come off for some time. Come on, we have to reach the island by dark, if we want to keep the porters with us.'

"All day, under the blazing white sun, our little line of burdened

men struggled down toward the center of the crater—down the harsh black cliffs by giant time-hewn steps, through the matted jungle of thorn-tree and twisted bush, into the realm of the sword-grass. Gashed by toppling blades of grass, we hewed our way through in a narrow, winding path between walls of shining green swords, won through to the marsh of the reeds. Narrow black ledges ran out like the backs of prehistoric monsters, wallowing in the mire. Straight and slim the reeds rose to the pale sky, their tips plumed with fronds of pale leaf-green, their glassy shafts ribbed with snowy white. Out over the black ridges we filed, two white men and a dozen laden blacks, with the malignant rattle and chuckle of the reeds all about us, then over hidden fordings, waist-deep in thick slime and fetid water to where the island's steeped pile jutted from the morass. Once, stumbling, I clutched wildly at a reed for safety. Like a dry bone, it snapped, scoring my arm and hand with its glassy sharpness, and all about the great reeds whined and chuckled as the crimson blood ran merrily down the glistening channel of flinty green to stain for an instant the thick black waters of the swamp.

"On the island was a little huddle of rude huts, built of piled rock from the cliffs that rose from a narrow beach to the pinnacle of the island. Somewhere, here in the bowels of this blasted mountain of black rock, was radium, the new god of Man, waiting to be wrenched forth by me and by the Company to make wealth for those who might benefit.

"Tom pointed to a gorge that ran back from the huts. 'The ore is in there,' he said 'or, rather, the out-crop. The stuff is everywhere underneath us, the electroscope shows. I guess it must underlie the entire crater—too deep to harm us, but close enough to the surface to have some queer effects that I've never quite explained to my satisfaction. You can see for yourself, later, We have work to do now.'

"Night came. All through the blazing afternoon we had toiled to set up our rough laboratory in the largest of the caverns that riddled the peak. Tom had used it before, and with the few additions that we had been able to bring, chiefly electrical apparatus, it began to really resemble the thing it was supposed to be. Tom showed me something else, too, a five-foot disk of figured quartz, fused and ground during his last visit to this place. Above the camp, on the summit of the central peak, was his cavern observatory, where he sat alone and gazed through his great telescope at the glory of the African night. Three years he had been here, searching out the hidden lode, and in the long nights when

the chuckle of the reeds drove sleep from him he had found rest and comradeship in the stars.

"As the veil of spangled velvet settled down over the desert, he led me from the little cave up a winding passage in the peak to the summit of the pinnacle, overlooking the marsh. On every side it glowed with a ghostly fire, like the fox-fire of the woods at home, phosphorescent green streamers leaping from the tufted reed-tops into the night, and vanishing. Like candles, or long slender tapers of a strange wax the great reeds burned, flaming, yet unconsumed. Beyond them, the girdle of sword-grass glowed paler, and farther still the dwarfed thorn-trees spread a net of fiery lace against the black of the crater walls, jutting great and dim against the Milky Way. All the mighty oval of Hell's Garden burned with that pale green radiance, save only the island where we stood. And, perhaps solely in my imagination, it, too, glowed faintly with a radiant mist.

"It's the radium," Tom explained. "The stuff is so plentiful here that everything fairly reeks of it, is energized right up to the hilt. There's too much for me to locate it with the electroscope—that's why it took me so long to find the main outcrop. It's quite a sight, isn't it? The blacks won't go out there at night. They think the lights are devils hunting for them—with lanterns, I guess. But I've been out. It's a great experience to wander through that sea of green fire, forming a luminous roof over your head that shuts out the stars. Up in the thorn-forest it's like a ceiling of fiery meshwork, but in the grass and the reeds there are only hundreds of huge candles, their flames leaping up and out into the universe of stars. It's a great experience, I tell you; one you mustn't miss. Some night, when you are sure you won't get lost, you must go, alone."

"A week later I was ready to go. For a month or more we were to be busy with the ore, but on this night we were free, and at midnight, with the proper mental set, I was to go out into the weird fire of Hell's Garden, amidst the demon-chuckle of the blazing reeds, and commune with the wonders of Nature. I doubted if I would get the kick out of it that Tom got, but I was willing to do my darnedest. In the seclusion of our little laboratory we discussed matters of varying import, while I waited for my rather doubtful treat.

"What do you think of Arrhenius' theory?" Tom asked me suddenly, apropos of nothing.

"Well," I replied, "it seems to work. It's widely enough accepted, goodness knows, and it is reasonable enough to suit me—fits the prop-

erties of solutions to perfection, or nearly so. If we knew a little more about ionization in solids, and about what determines degree of ionization, I think there would be no doubt as to its validity—were you thinking of presenting an opposing theory?”

“Lord, no! I don’t mean that! I don’t intend to buck the ionic theory! I meant Arrhenius’ other theory, the theory of life-spores.”

“I never heard of it. What is there to it, Tom? It sounds good to me.”

“It is good. I’m surprised to find that you don’t know it. Arrhenius was worried about life—especially about whether earth was the only inhabited planet in the solar system, or the Universe. We didn’t think so, but, as a chemist, he couldn’t quite imagine life springing up spontaneously, everywhere, by an accidental combination of energized elements, and he set out to devise a theory of transmission of life from one planet to another, and from star to star.

“He hit on a fine one, too, theory of life-spores, so to speak. You know that many of the lower forms of life are practically infinitesimal in size, like the bacteria, and consequently of great surface, relative to their mass. You know, too, that they can exist under the most trying conditions. Bacteria have been found thousands of feet down in the Earth, in the oil shales, and up in the topmost levels of the atmosphere. They have been frozen, dried, sealed in a vacuum, and lived on quite happily in a state of suspended animation. Not only the lower forms of life, but high forms, plants, act much the same. Look at the minute spores flung out by fungi and ferns and mosses, wafted away, God knows where, by the slightest breeze. Look at the grain found in Egyptian and Peruvian tombs, reaped and stowed away in ancient tombs thousands of years ago, and growing again when it is planted today. Look at the frogs and fish that have been sealed in rock or frozen in ice, and lived again. Darn it all, Bill, life is the hardest thing to destroy that you can imagine, if it is protected rightly!

“Arrhenius knew of all this, and it gave him a working basis that made the building of a theory simplicity itself. Imagine a little clump of lichens, Bill, clinging on some mountainside. One day its many little red and blue cups spring open and spew out millions on millions of tiny, invisible spores, seeds if you like, potential life. The up-draft of the mountain slope whisks them away, scatters them over the crags and cliffs, then bears a few off into the upper reaches of the atmosphere. Some come down with condensing rain and hail, some settle slowly in some other part of the globe. Some never settle, flung from level to

level of the atmosphere by the jostling, battering molecules of the air. But here and there Bill, a microscopic spore escapes entirely!

"Beaten back and forth by hurtling molecules of hydrogen and helium, it one day reaches the edge, the limit of the corporeal earth, and speeds out into empty space. Now the blazing sun comes from behind the eclipsing earth, and the full power and glory of its light catches the tiny voyager in space, bears him off, as it bears the filmy train of a comet, out, out from sun and earth into the star-flecked emptiness. Some day a heavenly body checks its course, another atmosphere, and it settles to the ground or is flung again, to wander anew. Somewhere, on Mars, on Jupiter or Neptune, perhaps on another star or another universe, life has come to rest! And one day it finds food and water and warmth, and the new planet finds a tiny fleck of grey-green lichen growing and spreading—a messenger from earth!

"That is Arrhenius' Odyssey of a life-spore, Bill. Quite a story, isn't it? Think of the dust spouting up from our cities daily—bacteria, tiny parasites, little lost fern spores and moss spores. Some fall back—most of them—to plague housewives, but here and there one escapes, and here and there one finds a new home, and evolution starts its inevitable course toward the top. That is Arrhenius' theory, Bill. Think what it means—life driving out from the great suns to the small, from the mighty galaxy to the little star-cloud, diffusing into space with every minute and second of the day, from every center of life. There need be only one accident, Bill, or one Creation, and life will go out to all Space!

"It's fascinating to me, Bill. Think of the infinity of varieties of life that must arise in this boundless Universe of ours! Think of the vagaries of evolution that may produce a ruling cabbage, or a ruling worm, or something no man has imagined! All about us they may be evolving and sending out tiny messengers into space—messengers that will some day reach our little earth and contest the life they find here. Even if Man never succeeds in plumbing Space with his rockets, the mighty traffic of life will go on! Look up there, Bill, where the stars are blazing. Perhaps even now—*Gee, Gosh!*"

"He sprang to his feet like a madman. I had been listening drowsily, half hearing, half wondering how to avoid giving up this comfort for a mad scramble through the reeds and sword-grass. Now I, too, leaped to my feet and looked after him, to where he was scrambling up the rough slope to the telescope. Then my gaze rose to the stars above me, and on the instant I was tearing wildly at his heels. Blazing brighter

than anything I had ever seen, brighter than any planet or meteor, shone a great new star!

"You recognize it, doubtless, as the great nova in Pegasus. It was nearer than any other star known, barely a light year distant, and was visible even in the light of the day, though it was only twenty degrees from the equator. For two months it blazed in the great square of Pegasus; then vanished as it came. For two months every telescope on the earth was fixed on its pure white glory, and men of science measured it, and weighed it, and delved into its secrets as never before Man had studied a star. With our sixty-inch reflector, in the giant crater of Hell's Garden, it shone directly overhead, and we watched and measured and photographed, while the natives beat their bull-hide drums and moaned in fear and worship. We saw, too, the veiling of its light as earth swung in its orbit so as to bring before its face the great cloud of cosmic dust, remains of a long-dead, burnt-out star, that hung between the two suns, slightly over a million million miles away. Through its veil, the white fire of the nova was reddened and dimmed, but still it was the brightest object in the skies, save only the sun. Weeks before that first night, with the driving blaze of the new-born sun behind them, these cosmic voyagers must have set forth, whirling their lengthy way through space at nearly half the speed of light, but it was not for over two months that a few of them reached their goal and sank in the shadow of a wheeling planet to their new domain.

"During the burning heat of the day we mapped the lode as best we could, and assayed samples of the ore that our mining produced, pitch-blende fabulously rich in radium. During the long nights we gazed wondering at the star that hung like a mighty lantern overhead. Then, one night, it winked out as suddenly as it came, and the square of Pegasus gaped empty. Three days were gone since then, and we sat high on a pinnacle of the western wall, the sun at our backs, looking out over the varied garden of the crater to where the shadow of the central peak crept along the seared black dial of the eastern rampart.

"I thought of that night, less than a week before the great star had disappeared, when the heavens about it glowed faintly red, over a large area, as a swarm of tiny meteors reached the denser strata of our atmosphere. Tom had said that they might be motes from that dark dust cloud that hung in space before the nova, driven by the pressure of light with velocity great enough to give an appreciable glow as they flared into light and disappeared. I wondered if, perhaps, one or two of

the millions might have survived, too large to fuse before their fall was checked, or too small to suffer the friction of the air.

"At the thought, my eyes turned upward to where the great star had so lately burned, and as they fell back from the empty whiteness of the sky, a tiny lance of light struck their gaze and held it. High above the desert, a speck of light was drifting earthward, scaling in long slow spirals out of the cloudless heavens, floating idly in the hot east wind from the desert that parched our faces and bleached the hair straggling from beneath our sun-helmets. Lazily it fell, like a dropping leaf, rocking from side to side in long, shallow sweeps that covered miles in their easy flow. Mentally I envisioned a tiny flake of crystal, atom-thin, gliding in the long inclines of the winds, the glory of the sun reflected from its polished faces. From what desert of earth had it been swept up by the wind that now bore it so gently downward? Or had it been wafted by winds of the ether, light-eddies that swirled among the stars? Beside me Tom pointed to the north, where a second mote of light sank like thistledown to the desert. The wind was rising now, and shifting from east to north, and as its gentle sighing among the thorn-trees rose to a keening wail, the chatter and whine of the reeds rose to our ears from beyond the rippling billows of shadow that stroked the grasses. Dust was whirling up, darkening the sky beyond the farther wall, and the twin motes had vanished. Then, far below in the heart of the marsh, the sinking sun struck an instant glint of light, tiny and shifting, that sloped down among the reeds and was gone. Hurriedly we gathered up our packs and sought shelter from the wind-driven sand that was scoring our faces as it had scored the black crags for untold ages.

"The recovery of radium from pitchblende is not an easy task, especially when you must synthesize such chemicals as you cannot easily transport to the location of your deposit. We were isolated in a desert crater, at least partially volcanic in origin. We had a hot spring supersaturated with carbon dioxide, at very nearly 300 atmospheres of pressure, that could be and was capped, and so controlled for our use. We had sulfur banks, in the crater itself; and two days into the desert were the remains of a great salt lake, now but a scale of blinding white against the less white sand. We had the tools of the chemist, and we needed no more.

"The sulfur was burned, and the resulting dioxide reburned to trioxide, and dissolved to form sulfuric acid, which we distilled to increase the concentration. Tom had this all ready to run, from his former visit. In a chamber over the sulfur kilns, using the heat of combustion of the

sulfur, we ran our Haber nitrogen fixation, rather crudely, but well enough for the purpose. Nitrogen from the air, and hydrogen from electrolyzed water united at about 700 degrees Centigrade and 50 atmospheres of pressure, with iron dust as catalyst, to form ammonia. From this we ran to our Solvay cell, producing sodium carbonate. Strong brine was saturated with ammonia and carbon dioxide, under the highest pressure we could reach. The sodium bicarbonate that precipitated was heated to convert to the carbonate. Finally, from salt and sulfuric acid, we made hydrochloric acid.

"All this was merely preliminary to our real work—the extraction of radium from pitchblende. There was a little over half a ton of ore available in loose form, and, from the preliminary assays, we hoped to produce nearly half a gram of radium, or, what was equivalent, sixty-five hundredths of a gram of radium chloride, really a huge yield.

"In pitchblende, the characteristic uranium ore, radium, with other metals and some of the rare earths, is in the form of sulfate. This we roasted with our sodium carbonate and treated the resulting carbonates with sulfuric acid, converting the salts back and forth from sulfate to carbonate until only radium and barium were left of the original metals. Now came the ticklish part. The radium and barium carbonates were run over into chlorides with hydrochloric acid, and the salts crystallized out in small cells, in the hot sun or in the blast from our sulfur burner. First came the radium chloride—tiny white crystals that were washed and recrystallized until they shone like little needles of frost, then put carefully away in quartz tubes and stored in a container of thick lead. Then the barium chloride would settle, crystals of the same sort, but colored by the radium to a yellow or pale orange or delicate salmon. Again they were dissolved, and again crystallized, until the barium salt was almost as pure as the precious radium in its lead casket. Gnomes we must have seemed, robed and hooded in cloth of lead to protect us from the harmful rays of the radium, as we bent over the little porcelain dishes of gleaming, faceted prisms, sorting the treasure from the dross, and stowing it away with elation in our hearts. The blacks feared us as they feared the luminescence of the crater—with much of awe for the white demi-gods who played with light and life. For once Tom had cured a tumor for their headman, in the days of the first expedition, and the man had stolen the white chief's medicine and died horribly of the burns from the radium, tucked, in its little quartz capsule, into his loin-cloth.

"For days we were absorbed entirely in our work, moving from hut

to laboratory and back as in a dream, mechanically, dropping to sleep like men dead after the heat and fumes of the laboratory. Twice, the blacks tried to bolt, but herded back again in fear of something we had neither time nor inclination to examine. Then came the day when we looked fondly at the little group of tiny quartz tubes, sealed upon their precious burden, and left the acid-saturated air of the ill-ventilated cave for the summit of the central peak, to look again at the glory of the outer, greater universe. For a while we scanned the heavens, then lay quiet upon the upper terrace, dreaming the dreams of the successful.

"Down from the crater's towering rim rushed a little, hot breeze, fanning our hair and beards gently as it passed. Out over the marsh it danced, and back to our drowsy senses came the rattle and whine of the great reeds, and the rustle of their plumed tips, lit with the wan fire that burned through all the crater, witness to the hoard beneath. Half asleep, I listened, making of the sound a fairy music, albeit a 'Danse Macabre' of the gnomes, delving as we into the treasure-chest of Mother Nature—a bone-dry rattle of flinty castanets and piercing wail of pipes and fiddles—the music that had become familiar in months past. In my mind's eye, I saw the little orchestra, capped with dancing fox-fire, scraping and piping and rattling to an unknown uneasy tune, old as the moon, and now I seemed to see a new musician in the group, slim and green-clad, bearing little festoons of crystal bells that swung to the rhythm of his capers and chimed and tinkled in sly glee at an ancient trick, played by the elder gods on Man, in hiding away the riches of the earth to be a source of hate and strife and bloodshed to eternity. Where had he come from and when, this elfin bellman? Where did the impish crystal dripping of his bells fit into the mad symphony of the crater? Drifting up as from a great depth, the question bore me out of my dream-world into reality, a reality where tall plumed reeds chattered and screamed their dismal dirge, and where a faint striking of crystal on crystal, whose chiming carillon danced liltily, floated to us on the breeze.

"Tom sensed my waking. 'Hear it?' he asked.

"Yes."

"It's new. Perhaps it has been here for some time, since we have been working, but not before. It's a queer sound, isn't it, like little bells—like the little silver bells on a leper's hood. I wonder what turned the blacks back, after they tried to bolt. That's quite a problem in itself, if you stop to think of it. And I wonder what makes that tinkle. I didn't

hear it when I was here before, or this time either, until now. We'll have to try and find out, tomorrow.'

"I raised myself on one elbow and looked out over the flickering fires of the marsh, toward the spot whence the elfin ringing came, trying to see through the green haze what manner or source it had. It seemed that out there the light thickened and changed hue, melted from the pale blue-green of the reed-fire to a warmer shade of violet, with much red in it. Out there was the trail to outside, the trail the blacks had taken, to return in sullen awe and fear. I had never yet been out there at night, when the radium-born light danced overhead among the slender reed-tops and clung about one in a fiery mist.

"Tom,' I said, 'do you feel like finding out now?'

"What do you mean?'

"Look there—no—over there, by the trail out. Yes, there. Do you see anything—a light?'

"No. I don't see—oh, by Jove, I do. You mean a sort of reddening, purplish, in the green? It doesn't waver so much as the rest, but flickers, like a candle, pulsing up and down, so to speak.'

"Yes, that's it. I think it's near the trail. I remember that ridge over to the left of it. We could try, anyway, and I would see the swamp by night, even if I'm not alone. What do you say? Can you find your way out, and back again, in the dark?'

"Sure! It would be hard to lose me here. I'm game to go, if you are. It should be interesting, to say the least, for I'll swear that that tinkling is brand new to the crater, and so is that glow. Did you notice, it has a sort of carmine tinge, like the radium spectrum? The energy levels ought to be about the same. Let's go. Bring down the robes, will you? They ought to be in the lab.'

"Great! We'd better wear boots, and I have a hunch that the small kit will be handy, if we can find a place to set up the spectroscope. I'll go and get it, while you orate to the porters.'

"The porters, especially the headman, did not at all cotton to our idea of wandering out at night to beard the bellman in his lair, but what they couldn't help they couldn't help, and they stayed put. Just for a moment I caught a queer glint in the little eyes of the headman, but it faded quickly and I thought no more of it at the time.

"We clambered with difficulty down the steep slope of the island to the narrow beach of fallen rock below, then skirted the edge of the murky waters until we reached the place where the trail came out of the swamp. All around the island was a broad belt of open water, but

only here was it shallow enough to permit crossing without a boat of some sort. Tom had explored the entire crater during his former trip, and we had gone over part of it together since, trying to trace the submerged lode of pitchblende with the more refined instruments that the company had provided. Just here, a narrow dyke ran out under the water to the reed-beds, where a zig-zag path of dykes and fords led to the distant shore. As we plowed steadily through the viscid water, it sent back to us a little malignant, chuckling gurgle of glee to blend with the rattle and whine and tinkle from beyond.

“At last we were in the reeds, and making our way along a low ridge with the black ooze stirring sluggishly at our feet, lit with a misty phosphorescence that hung low over the surface, where a thin scum of algæ lived its stagnant life. On either hand the thin columns of the reeds showed dimly through the luminous mist, more blue than green at this closer distance, like tall slender rods of banded glass. A few feet more above our heads the ribbed stalks broke into great plumes of feathery filaments, slender as tongues of green flame, from whose every needle-point played the pale ghost fire of the marsh. Like the corpse-candles and will-o'-the-wisps of old lore, they flickered aloft and vanished—pure energy from the hidden radium rising through these flinty veins and leaking off into the air of the crater, exciting it to vivid but pale, greenish blue fluorescence. Here and there, where a plume was more compact, the green burned like a giant taper in a long, pointed peak of light that faded at its edges into nothingness. Even now we began to sense the supercharged quality of the atmosphere, and we seemed to see an uncanny bluish lustre of decay veiling our exposed skin. Indeed, our teeth and eyeballs were already glowing dimly, giving us an unearthly appearance, such as must have driven the blacks near to madness on the night when they fled for the second time, to creep back sullenly with crazed fear in their blood-shot eyes. We saw only weird beauty in this fairy play of light among the great reeds—they saw the lure of demons, soul-sucking and hungry. Perhaps, after all, civilization is merely a growing sympathy with the world whose phenomena have impressed themselves upon the mind of the race.

“For over an hour we wound in single file through the unmarked byways of the marsh. Now our faces were less plainly lit in the bluish light. The water glowed no longer. The thin haze of leakage from the joints of the reeds no longer outlined their slender stalks with blue-green fire. Even the discharge from the plumes had lessened considerably. It was as though some great reservoir of energy were sucking up the

radiation of the hidden radium, deflecting it from the reeds as a magnet will deflect steel, or a mirror focus light. I wondered what new horror of the swamp had warped the structure of this portion of Space so as to focus on itself the energy of the swamp. I was soon answered.

"We had perhaps an hour to sunrise; an hour in which to discover the source of the strange light before the glare of the African sun should blot it out. Now only the tufted reed-tips glowed wanly green. The sky ahead, between the blackly silhouetted stalks, was stained with a carmine glow, mingling with blue to give a rich, deep hue of purple. The tinkle of crystal bells rang nearer, rising above the clatter and dismal wail of the reeds, loud and clear. It had not the elfin enchantment that distance lent it, now. It was part and parcel with the other sounds of Hell's Garden, evil and exultant. And now we could hear that it came intermittently, with none of the measured symmetry of tolling bells, myriad sharp clashes of crystal on crystal, with a faint, tense twang accompanying them. And, too, utterly inaudible at a distance, came now a thin vibrant singing of tense matter, taut and keen, adding to the clamor of this goblin orchestra; a new note, that sent a little chilly thrill up my spine.

"The ridges wound in and out among the tall, silent reeds, even their whine and rattle lost in the presence of this great unknown vampire of the marsh, feeding upon their energy and their life. I fancied that they were less stiff and rigid, drooping under the energy-hunger that was consuming them. The purple light filled all the sky before us now, the reeds standing black and dead against it, and the clang and hum had risen to the clamor of a forge. Waist deep in liquid mire, we floundered on, the oily black surface throwing back the glare from the sky in little darting flashes of red and purple. Then, suddenly, the path turned, the dense curtain of reeds fell back on either side, and the secret of the marsh lay before us.

"Like a dense fog the mist closed down on us, rich purple shot with flares of carmine. Where it bathed the rampart of reeds, the tall stalks crumbled and fell, limply, with no clatter of flint on flint, yet we felt no ill effects, save a faint thrill of energy coursing through our bodies, as in a highly electrified atmosphere. However, when I opened the kit later, to use it, the prisms and lenses of the portable spectroscope were gone—dissolved into empty air. It was hard to see through the thick luminescence, that swathed and hid whatever lay at its heart, and we pressed on through the dark water into the center of the great cloud of light. It must have been like a great hollow sphere, a hundred yards or

more in thickness, for it seemed an eternity before it thinned and vanished utterly.

"Before us lay a fairy mountain of crystal, a faceted wilderness. Of every crystal form known to Man they were, hexagonal and triangular prisms, steep pyramids, thick-based obelisks and slender minarets, all of transparent flashing crystal. From the black water they rose in a huge jagged pile, hundreds of feet to where the stars were blotted out in the purple light-haze. And from every peak and pinnacle, from every needle-tipped spire poured great leaping tongues of carmine and sapphire flame, that met and mingled in the purple of the haze.

"Not like the slow seepage of the reeds was this, but a vast conflagration of escaping energy, blazing fiercely. The crystals glowed from within with a clear white light that seemingly fed the flame-tongues pouring from every angle of the mighty mountain of crystal, hurling forth the life of the swamp in great streamers of red and blue fire that danced and leaped from crest to crest and from crest to glowing purple haze hanging low above in a shrouding, concealing blanket.

"God!" cried Tom in a stifled voice. "The energy of it! Bill, man, have you ever seen the like? Bill, it can't be earthly—it's too huge, too colossal for earth. It would drain our little planet of energy and life, and leave it an empty husk in Space! It must be from beyond, from out there among the stars and galaxies. There are worlds out there that no man may imagine, or even dream of—"

"Tom!" I shouted. "Tom, can't you see? It's moving! It's growing! Tom, *that Thing is alive!*"

"All the great tumbled heap of crystal was stirring slowly, uneasily, with life. Huge hexagonal prisms were swelling visibly, rising toward the mist above. Now a broad facet burst with a shattering clang, and a slender triangular shaft shot from its face, out and diagonally up, blue glory streaming from its tip. Now a thin rectangular column was thrusting up and up, with uncanny speed, from the very summit of the pile. And now a second shaft was darting toward it from one side, catching it square, bringing it down with a clash of crystal on crystal, even as new and different forms sprang from its shattered base. And as it grew upward, the great mass spread outward, toward us, with that steady creeping that gives the impression of awful relentless speed and purpose. Often, in years gone, I had dropped crystals in a beaker of water-glass, sodium silicate solution, and watched them swell and send up pseudopods in a weird semblance of life, forming a strange submarine garden of sponge and sea-fern and tentacled polyp. But they

were but phantoms of solidity—fragile shells filled with dense solutions, while these things, growing with the same strange speed, were solid throughout. In my mock-garden, the water-glass had fed them the silica that made them grow, but here—I did not know. It must suffice that they were growing and spreading from some hidden central source, with the twang and clash of striking crystal, and the high hum that told us that the whole great body of the thing was vibrant with energy, and with something akin to life.

“For this was no mechanical growth, as in the test-tube garden. I sensed that at once. There the crystals were surrounded by a medium that supplied them automatically with the materials of their growth. Here there was only the air and the shallow water, but here was that alien element that upsets all the carefully delineated laws of chance. Here was life.

“I remembered the purple mist, fed by the energy that poured from these living crystals, energy of radium, drained from the marsh beneath. I remembered how it had caressed the ranks of the reeds, and how the slender stalks had drooped and sunk rotting into the slime, stripped of their silica. And I understood the power of this thing. For out of the marsh, out of the earth itself, it was sucking the energy that meant life, moulding that energy into the glory of flame that it poured out from every facet and crest into the great hollow sphere of purple light-stuff that surrounded it and fed it with the silica that was stripped by some strange action from the great reeds. Beyond all doubt, this crystal monstrosity was alive, intelligent, as we—or even more so. And its purpose was conquest.

“Tom spoke, his shout, a thin piping above the din. ‘I think it’s the radium, Bill. Maybe it has never had such a store of energy before, in its parent star. Here the entire crater is built on a foundation of nearly pure energy, and there is silica to boot, plenty of it, in the reeds and the desert around. I think, if it grew more slowly, more normally, there would be more form, more regularity, more system to it. There would not be those ruptured facets and broken columns, but an orderly array, an intelligent array, with some show of symmetry.

“Now it’s haphazard, uncontrolled, energy-drunk. Its will, or mind, or whatever it has that corresponds to our conception of controlling intelligence, is submerged in one grand orgy of unrestrained growth. I wonder what will happen when it strikes the parent lode, down under the swamp. There will be a crisis, certainly. A man cannot indulge

without limit, nor can a crystal thing, I think. It will be a wonderful sight, whatever happens!

"Tom, where do you think it came from? I have an idea, a wild one, but it seems to fit. Do you remember that day on the rim of the crater, after the nova appeared? Do you remember those two motes of crystal, little crystal scales dropping from the upper atmosphere—from space, perhaps? I think they were the seeds, the life-spores of these things. The light of the nova drove them here, Tom, from some dead sun out there in space, some sun that they have sucked dry, then gone to seed, so to speak. Arrhenius was right!

"But Bill, these aren't like ferns, or moss, or bacteria. Those were the things Arrhenius meant—low forms of life, with tiny spores that air and light could carry easily. These are crystal, and intelligent. I think they may well be as intelligent as we are. You don't see the lower forms of life getting power-drunk! I agree that they come from out in Space, but of their own accord."

"Listen here! I cried. 'There's nothing on earth—or off it, either—to prevent intelligent life from propagating by spores. If you ask me, it's a darn sight more brainy to have young that can handle themselves right off the bat, than to breed parasites that are absolutely useless for most of their life! Man would be a great deal more efficient if he could fertilize a cell and let it go at that, with no more worry and pain, like a fern. But Man can't do it, nor could most of the animals, and still be animals, because it would make him hard, emotionless, crystalline—like these things. I'm not kicking, Tom. I wouldn't change places for all the world. I just wanted to show you that intelligent life *can* reproduce by spores just as well as plants and moss. It's just that they are put together differently, mentally, so to speak. As for crystal spores being too heavy, that's nonsense! You've handled enough mica to know how thin and light it is. Even a light breeze can pick up a flake of it. And their spores could be smaller and thinner and lighter, very easily!'

"You win, I guess. It sounds reasonable enough. But you jump at conclusions too easily to suit me."

"Says you! But let's go back to dry land. With the prism gone out of the spectroscope, there's no sense in staying here in the mud forever. Besides, this thing gives me the willies. It isn't safe. You can't tell what the thing might do if it sobered up and started to balance accounts. I have a sneaking suspicion that we would be quite unnecessary to its scheme of life."

"To tell the truth, wonderful as the crystal creature was, and curious

though we were, the incessant din and the flow of raw color had put a rather severe strain on us. Also, it was nearly morning, and we had not slept for nearly two days. So back we went, floundering through mud and water, to the outer rim of the purple haze. The eastern sky was brightening, and the density of the haze had begun to decrease, so that we could see the crystal monster dimly through it. As we reached the edge of the reeds, we stopped to look back. The western wall of the crater was already in the light, and as we watched, the sun sloped up above the eastern crags, drowning out the purple mist with its brilliance. But most beautiful of all, as the first rays struck the great mountain of crystal, it burst into a glorious blaze of intense color—deep blue and peacock green, pure gold and vivid scarlet—a leaping sea of colored light, tinted and hued, such as no man had ever seen before. Every pinnacle was afire with the cascade of color that played about the great heap in a mighty halo of light, dazzling, coruscating. We were forced to turn our blinded eyes away, the pulsing beauty of the scene still before them in after-imagery, and turned back into the winding way among the reeds.

"It took perhaps an hour, in daylight, to struggle back through the mire to the island. We were worn out, and dazed by what we had seen. Tom shouted for the headman, then again, angrily, as the old fellow failed to appear. Impatiently he strode to the cleft leading from the beach to the upper rocks. Here, in a huddled semi-circle, clustered the rude rock huts of the blacks—silent and empty. The ever-burning fire before the hut of the headman was black and dead. And the mound of cases, that were our supplies, had shrunk nearly to nothingness. The blacks were gone. Gripped by superstition, they had plunged into the swamp on the side opposite the crystal monster and vanished forever.

"There was food enough left to carry us for months, for we had brought supplies enough to last all for nearly a year, and a good portion of it was left. The blacks had traveled fast and light, as any man will when fear grips him. So it was, after a deal of ineffective fuming and invective, that we decided to stay on as long as we could, and see the thing through.

"Tom put it to me plainly enough. 'You see, Bill, we're safe enough here, and this thing that's happening is important! You saw how that crystal thing eliminated the reeds, and how it grew. It did the same thing to your watch crystal, and the spectroscope. It may run out of silica, and it will probably run out of radium, but suppose it gets out

of the crater, into the desert? Think how it will feed on that sand—pure silica! Think of it growing, spreading, flooding over the entire world and wiping out Man's civilizations like so many grease-spots! I tell you, Bill, this thing means business, conquest, and it's up to us to stop it!"

"We-stuck. It is true that I wasn't fully in sympathy with Tom, though I didn't like to run any more than he did. Still, I felt more like fighting it with an army behind me, with dynamite and hydrofluoric acid, and an air squadron, but it would take two years at the least to go out and return, and the Thing was dangerous! And suppose they didn't believe us—or locked us up in some mad-house!

"Lord knows it was dead business, sitting there like two lumps of baked mud, waiting for—something. I thought, of the Colossus of Memnon, staring for dead ages out over the swelling dunes that emperors of two lands had held dear, chanting their dismal adoration of the sun until Time choked their dry tongues with dust and decay. Like them we were, two dried relics of a great race, staring out from our ledge over the desolation of the swamp, in our ears the death-rattle of the passing of the reeds. For we had no plan. Our decision had been heroic, but blind.

"By day we floundered around in the rotting swamp that bordered the Thing, watching its awful beauty and horrible life, like birds fascinated by a serpent—two tiny grimy specks cowering before a god of flashing flame. By night we crouched on our ledge before the cave, talking blindly of the things of which men babble so wisely, listening to the crystal clangōr growing ever mightier in our ears, gazing at the purple haze that crept about us. And we would sleep where we sat, when talk was done, and in the morning be drawn again to the hellish lode-star in the swamp.

"Like children or memory-stricken ancients, we made mighty plans and mighty decisions in those blind watches of the night. Utopias were raised with love and care from the dust of warring races, rose and fell again in shattered glory by the power of a word. A Universe passed in review before our judgment seat, in past and present and unseen future, the Universe of men, of Man, as the mind of the race comprehends its meaning. And in an hour or minute it had faded into emptiness, leaving only a Law, a Plan, for which we groped in vain. But ever our thoughts returned to that beyond in the swamp, to what it signified and what it implied, and we would grow silent and wait in blank despair for the unknown.

"Tom, somehow I feel that you've managed to get on the outside of the thing, that you understand it, and can feel the way it does, if you try. If you were it, what would you be afraid of? Come on, Tom, get along. How do we lick it?"

"What is it afraid of?"

"I don't know, Bill. It's weak somewhere, I suppose. I wonder what it is—fire, water, cold? It probably thinks ours is a nice little planet as planets go. There's no annoying competition, no race that can hurt it or disturb it; plenty of food—quite a decent little planet, after all. It will squat here, king of the world, and gorge and gorge—go on a regular spree, and get blind-drunk on free energy. *Man, Bill, I've got it!* But you knew all along! Come on! We'll smear that critter all over this part of Africa before we're through! And, man, what a sight it will be!"

"His plan was not at once evident, but as soon as we began to work on it, I saw what he meant to do, and my guess was confirmed by Tom himself. We set up an electrolytic cell of fused quartz, using a platinum anode and a cathode, or negative electrode, of pure distilled mercury. Into the cell went our precious crystals of radium chloride, dissolved in distilled water, the purest we could provide, and the current was passed through. We ran at ten milliamperes, or one hundredth of an ampere, for a little over the requisite six hours, in order to make sure of getting all of the precious stuff possible. Then I set up a little mercury still, and, swathed in extra coatings of lead impregnated cloth and hoods with an extra thickness of lead glass in the goggles, we transferred the mercury from the cathode chamber to the still—no longer pure mercury, but radium amalgam. We distilled off the mercury slowly and carefully, for now an accident would be fatal, meaning utter loss of that for which we had labored so long. Even more must we be careful not to let our hydrogen generators fail or catch fire, for this distillation must be performed in an atmosphere of highly combustible hydrogen. Eagerly we watched as the little pool above the flame grew smaller and more solid, watched the tiny drops of mercury form like sweat on the walls of the long condenser and trickle in swelling rivulets down its tight spiral to form again a tiny puddle in the receiving chamber. For the most part we watched silently, modern alchemists garbed in the mysterious shrouds of our trade, waiting for the Philosophers' Stone of this latter-day world to form. To break the strain, we talked in spurts and starts, our interest lagging again to the process before us. Tom wanted to make sure of a full yield, and so we stopped three times to transfer the distilling mercury to the cell or to bring new from it to the distilling

chamber. The life of a world depended on our getting every possible bit of radium that we could, and had not time been so deathly short, we would have returned to the outcrop to try to gouge more of the oily black clay from the rocky walls and pass it through all its long, arduous process of purification. However, there was not the slightest possibility that two men alone could perform that tedious task in time.

"'Energy is a wonderful thing, Bill,' said Tom one day. 'Probably it is the only thing, aside from Space and Time. In a way, it reminds me of the old gods of pagan legend, who would descend to earth and go about making themselves manifest to men in a thousand different forms, as often as not to the ultimate ruin of the race that was "honored" by their visit. Think of the forms in which men have detected its presence, in light and heat, all the invisible ranges below the infra-red and above the ultra-violet, in mechanical and chemical work, in electricity and magnetism, and from these in matter itself—matter the indestructible! Out there in those myriad suns that light the Universe, electrons are being stripped from their parent atoms, the protons and electrons of the nucleus are crowding together, coalescing into infinitesimal spurts of energy, quanta of vibrations, that hurtle out into Space at a speed that nothing may surpass in this Universe, until one day, ages after their conception, they reach one of the planets of a little yellow sun, seek out two representatives of an egotist biped race, and through their eyes and skins are transferred into nerve energy, making themselves known.

"'Every hour, every second of every day for untold ages those great suns have been pouring out their radiation, their life-blood into space. Here and there it reaches port, is transformed, and starts once more on its journey. With every instant the great furnaces of the stars are cooling, dying, and the cold dead bodies that litter Space are drinking in the energy that they pour out and coming to life, only to pass through the cycle of radiation and die anew. That is the terrible "*waermetod*," the "heat-death" of the Universe, Bill, when all Space shall be at the same temperature, the same dead level, and energy may no longer flow or be transformed. For energy must flow downhill, from high to low, hot to cold, light to dark.

"'There is a hope, a slim one, for the Universe, promising near immortality. Millikan has detected radiation driving in from open space, from empty blackness—energy created, it would seem. But that may not occur, so far as Man can understand the laws of the Universe, so he has measured the radiation and delved into the mechanics of the atom, and he has found that out there in Infinity, in emptiness, energy is

coalescing and condensing to form the building-stones of the Universe, the protons and electrons. And in turn these are meeting to form atoms of hydrogen and helium, which unite to give heavier, bigger atoms, and in so doing lose great gouts of energy that sink through many feet of lead, energy more penetrating than anything Man has found—the cosmic rays. Hydrogen, helium, even silicon and iron, Millikan sees out there, building up in nothingness, and there may be yet others—copper, zinc, silver, even radium and uranium and unknown elements beyond.

“For ages they will build up and collect to form new worlds in Space, and then the degeneration will begin once more, radium breaking down through endless ages to lead, other elements with periods no man has detected dropping down, down to hydrogen and death. But always, out in Space, new worlds are being created. It may be a damped cycle, Bill, each time building up to a point just lower than the last; each time dropping away more slowly to the inevitable “*waermetod*.” In our own world, there is nothing beyond uranium, which in itself is sinking slowly through isotopes of ionium, radium, niton, down in five billion years to lead, and in unknown, untold time to hydrogen, lowest of all the elements. In the past, perhaps, there has been a Universe of elements higher than uranium, that broke down quicker, while our world was building up to uranium. Now still another is rising, to silicon, to iron—perhaps no farther. And it, too, will die away, and others rise and fall to the awful “*waermetod*.”

“Still, I have hope, Bill. There is an energy form that obeys laws of its own, that has a driving power above Nature—that has Will! I mean that which we call Life—common in amoeba and dinosaur, in plant and in Man, and in that Thing out yonder. Water flows always down hill, unless Nature raises it by evaporation, but Man knows no level. Nature needs eternities to break down the elements, but Man does it in seconds with his cathode rays. Life must change the cycle in some way, Bill, how I cannot tell—for good or for bad. And yet, Man cannot build up the atoms that he destroys, but that day will come! Nature has cared for this emergency by scattering Life very sparingly through the Universe—yet we know that it can travel on wings of light through the empty space that hem's it in. Some say it is but a disease of rotting planets; others think it divinely given by a Creator. Both are right in some way, I suppose. Man can delay the end indefinitely, if he tries—but Nature has her little tricks, and it may well be that Man will not delay but hasten the last awful dissolution. Life is the one controlling,

uncontrollable degree of freedom in this Universe: God knows what it will do.

"Take this crystal thing out there in the swamp. It is a marvel of life and intelligence. It can control energy in ways that we men cannot even guess of, but Bill, *it can't control itself*. It is off on a cosmic spree, gorging on energy, spewing it out in awful waste, lost in an orgy of blind drunken growth. And right there I have it, Bill! Sooner or later it's bound to strike through to the lode under the crater and plunge in a mad growth that may kill it right then and there. Whatever happens, it will be right on the edge of a crisis. Probably it could live on with the pitchblende and maybe recover in time. I don't know. But, Bill, suppose that when it is right there on the fence between existence and destruction, I gave it a shove—to the left! Suppose I fed it this radium—all at once—half a gram of energy on the brink of disruption, energy enough to blow up a planet and shake a solar system! Man, Bill, *things are going to happen!* It's nearly eleven million million calories, if it goes into heat—enough to turn one hundred and sixty-five thousand tons of ice into steam! It just can't stand all that energy in a lump—I'll wager my life on that."

"Eagerly we watched the tiny silvery button form in the still, little more than a speck of shining white metal, yet worth millions to any man in the world beyond the desert. With the greatest care, keeping it always in its atmosphere of hydrogen to prevent its oxidation, we sealed the radium in a slender quill-like tube of quartz—half a gram of our lives, half a gram of discord and dissension should it be carried back to the company, dissension which we had sworn to bring back, for which we were paid—on delivery. I wondered what the company would say when we returned without it.

"Balancing the world against the company's opinion, they balanced well, all too well, for the world would never believe our story.

"Old Croesus was calling me outside. Something must be brewing. The crystal monster out there in the swamp must be getting near the lode by now, and it probably showed it, for the rock near such a vein gets pretty well saturated with the radioactive substances from the pitchblende.

"Surely enough, the globe of purple haze had spread out on both sides, following the hidden vein, until it nearly encircled the entire crater. The clatter of the reeds was entirely drowned out now by the hum and crash of crystal from the Thing, though we could see a narrow ring of wanly glowing tapers for perhaps a hundred yards before

the purple dome rose. The din was dreadful, now that we were out of the cave—shattered crystal crashing continually on all sides, while the metallic twang of rupturing facets and the taut hum of the straining mass had mounted to a crescendo screech. No longer was there any fairy tinkle of elfin bells! This was the forge of the old Norse dwarfs deep beneath Midgard, where the twisted craftsmen beat out for Thor a new hammer, of ice torn from the bodies of the Frost Giants, who roared their icy agony above the thrumming of the bellows and the beat of the forge. Hell's Garden was upholding its traditions heroically. It was too dark to see the flaming of the crystal beneath the cloaking mist, but we knew by the visible swelling of that purple cowl that it must be burning with fire greater by far than any we had seen before. The slow creep of the outer mist seemed to be accelerating a bit, and I knew that the roots of the Thing must be nearing the great vein of pitchblende that it was following around the crater.

"Nor were we disappointed, though the end came more suddenly than we had expected. At one instant the mist crept sluggishly to the tune of the slow crash of the growing crystal creature. Then, with such abruptness that the preceding din seemed like a sudden lull, it broke into a chaotic clamor that well-nigh deafened us. Twang and shattering crash followed each other with but the wink of an eye between, while the throb of growth that ran all through the great thing swept in an instant to a high-pitched wail like the scream of a great bridge-cable in the fury of the cyclone. The hood of purple swelled upward and forward, hemming in the island on every side and sweeping up and over it in a sudden flood of thick light that blotted out all but the little area immediately about us—I with my lead robe but half removed. Tom holding the squat cube of lead which contained the precious quill of radium. Then it passed up from us, and we were in the great cavity beneath its shroud where the Thing of crystal lurked.

"I took one look at the monster before me, then was out of my lead-woven robe and streaking up the face of the cliff to the observatory on its summit—Tom right at my heels with the little lead case. Past the cave mouth we clambered, and up to the six-foot platform at the very peak, then stopped, panting, cornered.

"For on all sides a mighty wall of crystal was rushing in upon us. Once, many years ago, I fled, a schoolboy, before the wall of water that poured down our little valley from a burst dam. It was like that, but where the wall of water had been tens of feet in height, this crystal barrier towered hundreds. It moved with that same effect of laborious-

ness that we had noticed before, but in truth it must have rushed down upon the island with the speed of a racing auto, all its precipitous face alive with jutting, darting lances of crystal that poured multicolored flame from every facet. Over the limp ranks of the fallen reeds it rushed, and grated on the rocky beach, swallowed in an instant our pitiful pile of food and rough huts, then was swarming up the face of the central cone, the summit of the wall tilting back to form a mighty peaked ridge that surrounded the island and shot in a frenzy of growth hundreds of feet above our heads. Truly that mother lode must have been rich in the food of the gods!

"As it reached the cavern of the laboratory and enveloped it, there was a hiss of released fires, and the monster seemed to wince as the caustic chemicals it had freed bit into its body. There was surely some effect, for the face of the wave was rising more slowly and stopping, half a dozen feet below our little summit of safety. Yet everywhere else the peak of the Thing was rocketing skyward in a chaotic frenzy, great lances and sabre-blades of flashing crystal thrusting in slow curves from rupturing facets, out and up to the hidden heavens from which this creature of silica had come. Unholy, awful growth it was, prism and pyramid and many-faceted shaft leaping in mad disorder from the great hulk beneath, while raw color played and flickered through their many-angled forms, colors that told of the enormous strain of growth within, and auroras of blue and scarlet fire poured in ranging streamers from every knife-edge and pinnacle. Up and up it soared in horrid din, hemming us as in a mighty cone of light, at whose vortex we stood. Above, the streamers of flame laced and mingled in a great Armageddon of color, dripping in huge gouts and sheets of fire about us and over us, filling us with the awful energy of the Thing. Fire flowed in my racing pulse, fire gripped my burning brain and surged through my twitching nerves. I was bathed in a halo of fire that leapt and crackled from every pore and burned in great ribbons that spun from my fingertips. The lead case that Tom clutched to his breast burned vivid white with the mingling energy that filled the atmosphere and vainly strove to pierce its wall, to the feast hidden within the shielding lead.

"And now in the peak above a great ravine was opening, widening, splitting slowly downward into the crystal mass, as if a huge invisible blade were forcing down and down into the body of the Thing. Sheer and smooth the great walls rose, colorless and transparent, and through them I gazed into the troubled heart of the Thing of crystal, where mighty rivers of light and life were surging to the surface. And now,

high above all else, there swam at its upper limit a great hexagonal column of green and golden flame, thrusting slowly up from the vitals of the Thing beneath. Smooth, unbroken it soared, and with its rising, the clamor of growth lulled and died, and far off over the distant desert I heard the wail of a questing kite. From its summit, now, a new form was budding, swelling swiftly to unbroken vastness, unangled, un-faceted—a giant sphere of purple flame that pulsed and throbbed with life—the life of the Thing. A hundred feet through its heart it was, clear as the crystal beneath it, yet vibrant with flame of lilac and hyacinth and lavender, deepening to the rich purple of Tyre-purple of emperors. Slowly it pulsed, as a thing breathing, and with each throb swelled mightier and more beautiful. And now little vortices, little cones of crystal clearness were opening and spinning all over its surface—clear as the rill springing fresh from the glacier's foot—little clear trumpets of life in the purple glory, like tiny ears, *like tiny eyes*. A feeling of great presence swept through me, and I knew that through its many little crystal eyes the Thing was watching us—the mighty sphere of living violet that was the mind of the crystal creature.

“From the column's crest poured a broad blade of crystal, straight from the foot of the great sphere between the towering crystal walls to our very feet, spanning the gap with a rainbow arch of opalescence, flung by the Frost Giants between Asgard of the Aesir and Midgard of men. And now the voice of the crystals had risen again, surging in dreamy billows of dull crooning through all that frozen mass. And now the mighty sphere of light was gliding slowly down the crystal path toward us—a monarch advancing to fix the doom of an insect race. But in my ears rang a cry of defiance, and like a warrior chieftain striding to meet the foe, Tom was leaping up that smooth road of crystal, up to meet the advancing sphere that was sweeping down like a Juggernaut upon us. How his feet clung to the crystal I cannot tell, except that his first great leap gave him the speed whose momentum bore him on. Lit with the flames that poured in great streamers from his glowing form, he dashed madly upward, in his lifted hand a tiny tube of quartz that blazed with a blinding white light, such as I had never seen. Then his mad rush slowed and stopped, and at the peak of his breathless course he hung motionless between the fathomless walls of crystal, his arm flew back, and the tiny oblong of white fire was hurtling straight to the purple heart of the glorious sphere. Then, like a lifeless rag, drained like the reeds of his every bit of energy, he was gliding limp down the crystal causeway.

"As the mind of the crystal Thing saw that speck of white fury darting to meet it, it paused a moment in wonder and puzzlement, then opened to envelop it. I had an instant vision of great fathomless depths of undulant opalescence, where mighty flaming streamers of life boiled and cascaded madly, then the purple glory closed greedily about the tiny tube with its radium messenger of unearthly feasting. The beat of sound was checked in a crushing hush that clutched at my throat and mind. Then it burst forth in awful frenzy, sweeping to a crescendo shriek of winds that rose to silence. About me poured the torrents of streaming flame, about me hurtled blade on blade of straining crystal, leaping and bursting into tangled chaotic growth, even as they shot from the shattered facets of the Thing. In a way, it was like the playing of Man-made lightning that I have seen in the laboratories of the Company, the fury of Nature's power unleashed and coursing in unchecked freedom, madly, blindly, to destruction. Yet here the flame-tongues that leapt and mazed were of crystal, hard and keen-edged, like slender warring blades that met and battled and fell in a hail of tiny gems about me, beating on my head and arms and slashing them until the blood spurted in little fountains from the tortured flesh. I cannot really tell of that moment, less than a second of life—it is beyond the power of mind and tongue to reproduce. Yet in my mind it is graven in undying imagery, burned in fiery panorama into my very soul. As my breath hissed in, the mighty sphere of Life hung dazed above the crystal maelstrom, and the body of him, who had brought it destruction, sped half-way to my feet down the rainbow incline. And as the breath went from me, emptiness gaped around me and the stars shone free upon the distant sands of the desert and the far-off mountain walls, and upon the flashing turmoil of light about the foot of the cone, down whose rocky sides little rivulets of tinkling crystal were trickling.

"The happening is beyond my mind. I heard no crash of collapse, nothing to tell of the death of the crystal Thing. Perhaps its sudden sound was above the power of ears to hear. One moment it was there, filled with horrid life and growth, and then—it was gone, and beneath the crater's floor twinkled in the starlight like the fabulous Valley of Diamonds in the legend of Sinbad, crystalline death.

"I found Tom, half buried in crystal debris on the ledge before the laboratory cave. He was horribly torn by the jagged prisms beneath and upon him, his bones splintered by the fall, but yet alive. He smiled up at me, his eyes calling me down beside him. Faintly the words came, panted out with each laboring breath of agony.

"'Bill, remember old Prof. Blakeslee? Remember—he said there might be life somewhere, life that wasn't just a disease of impure carbon? He said maybe, somewhere, there was life in which silicon took the place of carbon—same series in the periodic table, and all that.' And then—I heard him once—he said to himself, 'But try and find it. Try and find it, Bill. Just you try. Joke, isn't it? Joke!'"

"That was all.

"He lies, king of the Valley of Diamonds, in the topmost cave, where his precious telescope had been, where only twisted metal marks the spot where together we watched the swelling of the nova in Pegasus. All about, rising from the dead swamp to the flanks of the guardian range and banked halfway up the central cone and on every ledge to the topmost summit, lies a crystal carpet, throwing back the fire of the sun and stars in a prismatic glory of leaping light. And far beneath are the labyrinthine tunnels of the pitchblende lode, gutted in part by the crystal monster from the stars, but still bearing a fortune for him who can find it. I will not point the way. The crater is Tom's, his monument to death, and Man owes him its sanctuary. Some day it must needs be found again, some day this mad story will be accepted as truth and the name of Tom Gillian honored by his race, the bickering cattle for whom he died. Perhaps there will be decency enough extant in that future day to hold his tomb inviolate, but I fear not, for greed and reverence are incompatible in Man.

"Arab slavers found me, lost and raving in the desert, and made me brother by blood to them. I had crystals in my pockets, in place of food, crystals such as no man had ever seen, harder than diamond and of greater fire, but brittle. I have them still, a double handful and more. In the dark they blaze with the fire of radium that is in them, but they must be hidden away in lead lest their cold fire burn. The slavers believed my story, and in their tales of the camp-fire there is that of the world-devouring monster whose grave is abhorred of Mecca and the Faith.

"I am—outcast. The company dropped me like a live coal. I had no radium, no records, nothing, and my story was mad, fantastic. They chose their facts well, in their minds. We went out, two men with a mission, a duty. I returned alone, with slavers and a few crystals of some new, unimportant silicate. Perhaps we had fought over the crystals, perhaps over some slave. Perhaps there were beasts or fever, and I deserted him. Their minds are made up.

"I have tried to bury those memories, but at night they live again—

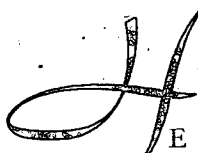
the death rattle of the reeds, that swelling tinkle of fairy bells, the crystal star-Thing and its mighty destruction—all live in my haunted brain. I told Blakeslee, eventually. He did not even speak, just turned away, as if I were a snake. I came here, finally, where no one knew me, and yesterday I saw your sign. I didn't want to leave anything untried, you see.

"But you're human. You'll be like all the rest. It can't fail, I suppose. Maybe you'll have me locked up. I haven't tried that; it might bring peace—of a sort. There isn't anything else left, unless I go back to those slavers and accept Islam. Not that religion matters. Christians have been no better than the rest—all are only human. And to cap the climax, the company is placing a branch here next month, in the old Western Electric plant. There isn't much left, is there? I can't even arrange a decent suicide—a scientist's suicide. It's funny!"

We've read dozens and hundreds of ghost stories, including many of spectral vengeance, but we don't think we've read any quite like this one. The story of "The Hollow Man" is not one of those calculated to jump out and yell "Boo!" at you or to otherwise scare you out of your wits. But it is designed to give you a steady continuous shudder, which the author of the celebrated "Limehouse Nights" is thoroughly qualified to do.

The Hollow Man

by Thomas Burke



HE CAME up one of the narrow streets which lead from the docks, and turned into a road whose farther end was gay with the lights of London. At the end of this road he went deep into the lights of London, and sometimes into its shadows. Farther and farther he went from the river, and did not pause until he had reached a poor quarter near the centre.

He made a tall, spare figure, clothed in a black mackintosh. Below this could be seen brown dungaree trousers. A peaked cap hid most of his face; the little that was exposed was white and sharp. In the autumn mist that filled the lighted streets as well as the dark he seemed a wraith, and some of those who passed him looked again, not sure whether they had indeed seen a living man. One or two of them moved their shoulders, as though shrinking from something.

His legs were long, but he walked with the short, deliberate steps of a blind man, though he was not blind. His eyes were open, and he stared straight ahead; but he seemed to see nothing and hear nothing. Neither the mournful hooting of sirens across the black water of the river, nor the genial windows of the shops in the big streets near the centre drew his head to-right or left. He walked as though he had no destination in mind, yet constantly, at this corner or that, he turned.

It seemed that an unseen hand was guiding him to a given point of whose location he was himself ignorant.

He was searching for a friend of fifteen years ago, and the unseen hand, or some dog-instinct, had led him from Africa to London, and was now leading him, along the last mile of his search, to a certain little eating-house. He did not know that he was going to the eating-house of his friend Nameless, but he did know, from the time he left Africa, that he was journeying towards Nameless, and he now knew that he was very near to Nameless.

Nameless didn't know that his old friend was anywhere near *him*, though, had he observed conditions that evening, he might have wondered why he was sitting up an hour later than usual. He was seated in one of the pews of his prosperous Workmen's Dining-Rooms—a little gold-mine his wife's relations called it—and he was smoking and looking at nothing. He had added up the till and written the copies of the bill of fare for next day, and there was nothing to keep him out of bed after his fifteen hours' attention to business. Had he been asked why he was sitting up later than usual, he would first have answered that he didn't know that he was, and would then have explained, in default of any other explanation, that it was for the purpose of having a last pipe. He was quite unaware that he was sitting up and keeping the door unlatched because a long-parted friend from Africa was seeking him and slowly approaching him, and needed his services. He was quite unaware that he had left the door unlatched at that late hour—half-past eleven—to admit pain and woe.

But even as many bells sent dolefully across the night from their steeples their disagreement as to the point of half-past eleven, pain and woe were but two streets away from him. The mackintosh and dungarees and the sharp white face were coming nearer every moment.

There was silence in the house and in the streets; a heavy silence, broken, or sometimes stressed, by the occasional night-noises—motor horns, back-firing of lorries, shunting at a distant terminus. That silence seemed to envelop the house, but he did not notice it. He did not notice the bells, and he did not even notice the lagging step that approached his shop, and passed—and returned—and passed again—and halted. He was aware of nothing save that he was smoking a last pipe, and he was sitting in somnolence, deaf and blind to anything not in his immediate neighbourhood.

But when a hand was laid on the latch, and the latch was lifted, he did hear that, and he looked up. And he saw the door open, and got up

and went to it. And there, just within the door, he came face to face with the thin figure of pain and woe.

* * * *

To kill a fellow-creature is a frightful thing. At the time the act is committed the murderer may have sound and convincing reasons (to him) for his act. But time and reflection may bring regret; even remorse; and this may live with him for many years. Examined in wakeful hours of the night or early morning, the reasons for the act may shed their cold logic, and may cease to be reasons and become mere excuses. And these naked excuses may strip the murderer and show him to himself as he is. They may begin to hunt his soul, and to run into every little corner of his mind and every little nerve, in search of it.

And if to kill a fellow-creature and to suffer recurrent regret for an act of heated blood is a frightful thing, it is still more frightful to kill a fellow-creature and bury his body deep in an African jungle, and then, fifteen years later, at about midnight, to see the latch of your door lifted by the hand you had stilled and to see the man, looking much as he did fifteen years ago, walk into your home and claim your hospitality.

* * * *

When the man in mackintosh and dungarees walked into the dining-rooms Nameless stood still; stared; staggered against a table; supported himself by a hand, and said, "Oh."

The other man said, "Nameless."

Then they looked at each other; Nameless with head thrust forward, mouth dropped, eyes wide; the visitor with a dull, glazed expression. If Nameless had not been the man he was—thick, bovine and costive—he would have flung up his arms and screamed. At that moment he felt the need of some such outlet, but did not know how to find it. The only dramatic expression he gave to the situation was to whisper instead of speak.

Twenty emotions came to life in his head and spine, and wrestled there. But they showed themselves only in his staring eyes and his whisper. His first thought, or rather, spasm, was Ghosts-Indigestion-Nervous-Breakdown. His second, when he saw that the figure was substantial and real, was Impersonation. But a slight movement on the part of the visitor dismissed that.

It was a little habitual movement which belonged only to that man; an unconscious twitching of the third finger of the left hand. He knew then that it was Gopak. Gopak, a little changed, but still, miraculously,

thirty-two. Gopak, alive, breathing and real. No ghost. No phantom of the stomach. He was as certain of that as he was that fifteen years ago he had killed Gopak stone-dead and buried him.

The blackness of the moment was lightened by Gopak. In thin, flat tones he asked, "May I sit down? I'm tired." He sat down, and said: "So tired."

Nameless still held the table. He whispered: "Gopak. . . . Gopak. . . . But I—I *killed* you. I killed you in the jungle. You were dead. I know you were."

Gopak passed his hand across his face. He seemed about to cry. "I know you did. I know. That's all I can remember—about this earth. You killed me." The voice became thinner and flatter. "And then they came and—disturbed me. They woke me up. And brought me back." He sat with shoulders sagged, arms drooping, hands hanging between knees. After the first recognition he did not look at Nameless; he looked at the floor.

"Came and disturbed you?" Nameless leaned forward and whispered the words. "Woke you up? Who?"

"The Leopard Men."

"The what?"

"The Leopard Men." The watery voice said it as casually as if it were saying "the night watchman."

"The Leopard Men?" Nameless stared, and his fat face crinkled in an effort to take in the situation of a midnight visitation from a dead man, and the dead man talking nonsense. He felt his blood moving out of its course. He looked at his own hand to see if it was his own hand. He looked at the table to see if it was his table. The hand and the table were facts, and if the dead man was a fact—and he was—his story might be a fact. It seemed anyway as sensible as the dead man's presence. He gave a heavy sigh from the stomach. "A-ah. . . . The Leopard Men. . . . Yes, I heard about them out there. Talès."

Gopak slowly wagged his head "Not tales. They're real. If they weren't real—I wouldn't be here. Would I?"

Nameless had to admit this. He had heard many tales "out there" about the Leopard Men, and had dismissed them as jungle yarns. But now, it seemed, jungle yarns had become commonplace fact in a little London shop. The watery voice went on. "They do it. I saw them. I came back in the middle of a circle of them. They killed a native to put his life into me. They wanted a white man—for their farm. So they brought me back. You may not believe it. You wouldn't *want* to be-

lieve it. You wouldn't want to—see or know anything like them. And I wouldn't want any man to. But it's true. That's how I'm here."

"But I left you absolutely dead. I made every test. It was three days before I buried you. And I buried you deep."

"I know. But that wouldn't make any difference to them. It was a long time after when they came and brought me back. And I'm still dead, you know. It's only my body they brought back." The voice trailed into a thread. "And I'm so tired."

Sitting in his prosperous eating-house Nameless was in the presence of an achieved miracle, but the everyday, solid appointments of the eating-house wouldn't let him fully comprehend it. Foolishly, as he realized when he had spoken, he asked Gopak to explain what had happened. Asked a man who couldn't really be alive to explain how he came to be alive. It was like asking Nothing to explain Everything.

Constantly, as he talked, he felt his grasp on his own mind slipping. The surprise of a sudden visitor at a late hour; the shock of the arrival of a long-dead man; and the realization that this long-dead man was not a wraith, were too much for him.

During the next half-hour he found himself talking to Gopak as to the Gopak he had known seventeen years ago when they were partners. Then he would be halted by the freezing knowledge that he was talking to a dead man, and that a dead man was faintly answering him. He felt that the thing couldn't really have happened, but in the interchange of talk he kept forgetting the improbable side of it, and accepting it. With each recollection of the truth, his mind would clear and settle in one thought—"I've got to get rid of him. How am I going to get rid of him?"

"But how did you get here?"

"I escaped." The words came slowly and thinly, and out of the body rather than the mouth.

"How?"

"I don't—know. I don't remember anything—except our quarrel. And being at rest."

"But why come all the way here? Why didn't you stay on the coast?"

"I don't—know. But you're the only man I know. The only man I can remember."

"But how did you find me?"

"I don't know. But I had to—find you. You're the only man—who can help me."

"But how can I help you?"

The head turned weakly from side to side. "I don't—know. But nobody else—can."

Nameless stared through the window, looking on to the lamplit street and seeing nothing of it. The everyday being which had been his half an hour ago had been annihilated; the everyday beliefs and disbeliefs shattered and mixed together. But some shred of his old sense and his old standards remained. He must handle this situation. "Well—what you want to do? What you going to do? I don't see how I can help you. And you can't stay here, obviously." A demon of perversity sent a facetious notion into his head—introducing Gopak to his wife—"This is my dead friend."

But on his last spoken remark Gopak made the effort of raising his head and staring with the glazed eyes at Nameless. "But I *must* stay here. There's nowhere else I can stay. I must stay here. That's why I came. You got to help me."

"But you can't stay here. I got no room. All occupied. Nowhere for you to sleep."

The wan voice said: "That doesn't matter. I *don't* sleep."

"Eh?"

"I *don't* sleep. I haven't slept since they brought me back. I can sit here—till you can think of some way of helping me."

"But how *can* I?" He again forgot the background of the situation, and began to get angry at the vision of a dead man sitting about the place waiting for him to think of something. "How *can* I if you don't tell me how?"

"I don't—know. But you got to. You killed me. And I was dead—and comfortable. As it all came from you—killing me—you're responsible for me being—like this. So you got to—help me. That's why I—came to you."

"But what do you want me to do?"

"I don't—know. I can't—think. But nobody but you can help me. I had to come to you. Something brought me—straight to you. That means that you're the one—that can help me. Now I'm with you, something will—happen to help me. I feel it will. In time you'll—think of something."

Nameless found his legs suddenly weak. He sat down and stared with a sick scowl at the hideous and the incomprehensible. Here was a dead man in his house—a man he had murdered in a moment of black temper—and he knew in his heart that he couldn't turn the man out. For one thing, he would have been afraid to touch him; he couldn't

see himself touching him. For another, faced with the miracle of the presence of a fifteen-years-dead man, he doubted whether physical force or any material agency would be effectual in moving the man.

His soul shivered, as all men's souls shiver at the demonstration of forces outside their mental or spiritual horizon. He had murdered this man, and often, in fifteen years, he had repented the act. If the man's appalling story were true, then he had some sort of right to turn to Nameless. Nameless recognized that, and knew that whatever happened he couldn't turn him out. His hot-tempered sin had literally come home to him.

The wan voice broke into his nightmare. "You go to rest, Nameless. I'll sit here. You go to rest." He put his face down to his hands and uttered a little moan. "Oh, why can't I rest?"

* * * *

Nameless came down early next morning with a half-hope that Gopak would not be there. But he was there, seated where Nameless had left him last night. Nameless made some tea, and showed him where he might wash. He washed listlessly, and crawled back to his seat, and listlessly drank the tea which Nameless brought to him.

To his wife and the kitchen helpers Nameless mentioned him as an old friend who had had a bit of a shock. "Shipwrecked and knocked on the head. But quite harmless, and he won't be staying long. He's waiting for admission to a home. A good pal to me in the past, and it's the least I can do to let him stay here a few days. Suffers from sleeplessness and prefers to sit up at night. Quite harmless."

But Gopak stayed more than a few days. He out-stayed everybody. Even when the customers had gone Gopak was still there.

On the first morning of his visit when the regular customers came in at mid-day, they looked at the odd, white figure sitting vacantly in the first pew, then stared, then moved away. All avoided the pew in which he sat. Nameless explained him to them, but his explanation did not seem to relieve the slight tension which settled on the dining-room. The atmosphere was not so brisk and chatty as usual. Even those who had their backs to the stranger seemed to be affected by his presence.

At the end of the first day Nameless, noticing this, told him that he had arranged a nice corner of the front-room upstairs, where he could sit by the window, and took his arm to take him upstairs. But Gopak feebly shook the hand away, and sat where he was. "No. I don't want to go. I'll stay here. I'll stay here. I don't want to move."

And he wouldn't move. After a few more pleadings Nameless real-

ized with dismay that his refusal was definite; that it would be futile to press him or force him; that he was going to sit in that dining-room for ever. He was as weak as a child and as firm as a rock. He continued to sit in that first pew, and the customers continued to avoid it, and to give queer glances at it. It seemed that they half-recognized that he was something more than a fellow who had had a shock.

During the second week of his stay three of the regular customers were missing, and more than one of those that remained made acidly facetious suggestions to Nameless that he park his lively friend somewhere else. He made things too exciting for them; all that whoopee took them off their work, and interfered with digestion. Nameless told them he would be staying only a day or so longer, but they found that this was untrue, and at the end of the second week eight of the regulars had found another place.

Each day, when the dinner-hour came, Nameless tried to get him to take a little walk, but always he refused. He would go out only at night, and then never more than two hundred yards from the shop. For the rest, he sat in his pew, sometimes dozing in the afternoon, at other times staring at the floor. He took his food abstractedly, and never knew whether he had had food or not. He spoke only when questioned, and the burden of his talk was "I'm so tired."

One thing only seemed to arouse any light of interest in him; one thing only drew his eyes from the floor. That was the seventeen-year-old daughter of his host, who was known as Bubbles, and who helped with the waiting. And Bubbles seemed to be the only member of the shop and its customers who did not shrink from him.

She knew nothing of the truth about him, but she seemed to understand him; and the only response he ever gave to anything was to her childish sympathy. She sat and chatted foolish chatter to him—"bringing him out of himself," she called it—and sometimes he would be brought out to the extent of a watery smile. He came to recognize her step, and would look up before she entered the room. Once or twice in the evening, when the shop was empty, and Nameless was sitting miserably with him, he would ask, without lifting his eyes, "Where's Bubbles?" and would be told that Bubbles had gone to the pictures or was out at a dance, and would relapse into deeper vacancy.

Nameless didn't like this. He was already visited by a curse which, in four weeks, had destroyed most of his business. Regular customers had dropped off two by two, and no new customers came to take their place. Strangers who dropped in once for a meal did not come again;

they could not keep their eyes or their minds off the forbidding, white-faced figure sitting motionless in the first pew. At mid-day, when the place had been crowded and latecomers had to wait for a seat, it was now two-thirds empty; only a few of the most thick-skinned remained faithful.

And on top of this there was the interest of the dead man in his daughter, an interest which seemed to be having an unpleasant effect. Nameless hadn't noticed it, but his wife had. "Bubbles don't seem as bright and lively as she was. You noticed it lately? She's getting quiet—and a bit slack. Sits about a lot. Paler than she used to be."

"Her age, perhaps."

"No. She's not one of these thin dark sort. No—it's something else. Just the last week or two I've noticed it. Off her food. Sits about doing nothing. No interest. May be nothing—just out of sorts, perhaps. . . . How much longer's that horrible friend of yours going to stay?"

* * * *

The horrible friend stayed some weeks longer—ten weeks in all—while Nameless watched his business drop to nothing and his daughter get pale and peevish. He knew the cause of it. There was no home in all England like his: no home that had a dead man sitting in it for ten weeks. A dead man brought, after a long time, from the grave, to sit and disturb his customers and take the vitality from his daughter. He couldn't tell this to anybody. Nobody would believe such nonsense. But he *knew* that he was entertaining a dead man, and, knowing that a long-dead man was walking the earth, he could believe in any result of that fact. He could believe almost anything that he would have derided ten weeks ago. His customers had abandoned his shop, not because of the presence of a silent, white-faced man, but because of the presence of a dead-living man. Their minds might not know it, but their blood knew it. And, as his business had been destroyed, so, he believed, would his daughter be destroyed. Her blood was not warning her; her blood told her only that this was a long-ago friend of her father's, and she was drawn to him.

It was at this point that Nameless, having no work to do, began to drink. And it was well that he did so. For out of the drink came an idea, and with that idea he freed himself from the curse upon him and his house.

The shop now served scarcely half a dozen customers at mid-day. It had become ill-kempt and dusty, and the service and the food were bad. Nameless took no trouble to be civil to his few customers. Often,

when he was notably under drink, he went to the trouble of being very rude to them. They talked about this. They talked about the decline of his business and the dustiness of the shop and the bad food. They talked about his drinking, and, of course, exaggerated it.

And they talked about the queer fellow who sat there day after day and gave everybody the creeps. A few outsiders, hearing the gossip, came to the dining-rooms to see the queer fellow and the always-tight proprietor; but they did not come again, and there were not enough of the curious to keep the place busy. It went down until it served scarcely two customers a day. And Nameless went down with it into drink.

Then, one evening, out of the drink he fished an inspiration.

He took it downstairs to Gopak, who was sitting in his usual seat, hands hanging, eyes on the floor. "Gopak—listen. You came here because I was the only man who could help you in your trouble. You listening?"

A faint "Yes" was his answer.

"Well, now. You told me I'd got to think of something. I've thought of something. . . . Listen. You say I'm responsible for your condition and got to get you out of it, because I killed you. I did. We had a row. You made me wild. You dared me. And what with that sun and the jungle and the insects, I wasn't meself. I killed you. The moment it was done I could 'a cut me right hand off. Because you and me were pals. I could 'a cut me right hand off."

"I know. I felt that directly it was over. I knew you were suffering."

"Ah! . . . I have suffered. And I'm suffering now. Well, this is what I've thought. All your present trouble comes from me killing you in that jungle and burying you. An idea came to me. Do you think it would help you—I—if I—if I—killed you again?"

For some seconds Gopak continued to stare at the floor. Then his shoulders moved. Then, while Nameless watched every little response to his idea, the watery voice began. "Yes. Yes. That's it. That's what I was waiting for. That's why I came here. I can see now. That's why I had to get here. Nobody else could kill me. Only you. I've got to be killed again. Yes, I see. But nobody else—would be able—to kill me. Only the man who first killed me. . . . Yes, you've found—what we're both—waiting for. Anybody else could shoot me—stab me—hang me—but they couldn't kill me. Only you. That's why I managed to get here and find you." The watery voice rose to a thin strength. "That's it. And you must do it. Do it now. You don't want to, I know. But you must. You *must*."

His head drooped and he stared at the floor. Nameless, too, stared at the floor. He was seeing things. He had murdered a man and had escaped all punishment save that of his own mind, which had been terrible enough. But now he was going to murder him again—not in a jungle but in a city; and he saw the slow points of the result.

He saw the arrest. He saw the first hearing. He saw the trial. He saw the cell. He saw the rope. He shuddered.

Then he saw the alternative—the breakdown of his life—a ruined business, poverty, the poor-house, a daughter robbed of her health and perhaps dying, and always the curse of the dead-living man, who might follow him to the poor-house. Better to end it all, he thought. Rid himself of the curse which Gopak had brought upon him and his family, and then rid his family of himself with a revolver. Better to follow up his idea.

He got stiffly to his feet. The hour was late evening—half-past ten—and the streets were quiet. He had pulled down the shop-blinds and locked the door. The room was lit by one light at the farther end. He moved about uncertainly and looked at Gopak. "Er—how would you—how shall I—"

Gopak said, "You did it with a knife. Just under the heart. You must do it that way again."

Nameless stood and looked at him for some seconds. Then, with an air of resolve, he shook himself. He walked quickly to the kitchen.

Three minutes later his wife and daughter heard a crash, as though a table had been overturned. They called but got no answer. When they came down they found him sitting in one of the pews, wiping sweat from his forehead. He was white and shaking, and appeared to be recovering from a faint.

"Whatever's the matter? You all right?"

He waved them away. "Yes, I'm all right. Touch of giddiness. Smoking too much, I think."

"Mmmm. Or drinking. . . . Where's your friend? Out for a walk?"

"No. He's gone off. Said he wouldn't impose any longer, and 'd go and find an infirmary." He spoke weakly and found trouble in picking words. "Didn't you hear that bang—when he shut the door?"

"I thought that was you fell down."

"No. It was him when he went. I couldn't stop him."

"Mmmm. Just as well, I think." She looked about her. "Things seem to 'a gone all wrong since he's been here."

There was a general air of dustiness about the place. The table-cloths

were dirty, not from use but from disuse. The windows were dim. A long knife, very dusty, was lying on the table under the window. In a corner by the door leading to the kitchen, unseen by her, lay a dusty mackintosh and dungarees, which appeared to have been tossed there. But it was over by the main door, near the first pew, that the dust was thickest—a long trail of it—greyish-white dust.

"Really this place gets more and more slap-dash. Just *look* at that dust by the door. Looks as though somebody's been spilling ashes all over the place."

Nameless looked at it, and his hands shook a little. But he answered, more firmly than before: "Yes, I know. I'll have a proper clean-up to-morrow."

For the first time in ten weeks he smiled at them; a thin, haggard smile, but a smile.

Digging among the caves and pits of the past, science has unearthed the bones of stranger, cruder men than ourselves. We learned that before we were, other lesser-evolved human races lived—to vanish with our coming. So the thought inevitably arises that if we replaced those ancients of Piltdown and Neanderthal, are we not then also subject to eventual replacement by finer men than today's none-too-perfect people? Some remarkable novels have been written around this theme. Now Nelson Bond, author of the oft-reprinted "Mr. Mergenthwirker's Lobbies" and a myriad other fine fantasies, turns his hand to a solution of this anthropological puzzler.

Conquerors' Isle

by Nelson Bond



YOU'VE GOT to believe this," said Brady. He spoke with tense, white-knuckled ferocity, his eyes intent on those of the older man. "It sounds utterly impossible, I know. It sounds—it sounds crazy. That's why I'm here. But it's the truth, and you've got to believe it! *Göt* to—sir," he finished, belatedly acknowledging his listener's seniority.

Lieutenant Commander Gorham said quietly: "At ease, Lieutenant. I'm here to consult with you as a physician, not order your cure as a superior officer. Suppose we ignore the braid while you tell me about it?"

Joe Brady smiled. It was his first smile in weeks, and his face could not quite accomplish it. His lips twisted jerkily, but his eyes remained blank windows into torment.

He said: "Thank you, Doctor. Where would you like me to begin?"

Gorham shuffled the pages of the lieutenant's case history. Random excerpts telescoped three years of spotless if not spectacular service: *Brady, Joseph Travers. . . . Age: 24. . . . Graduated, U.S.N.A., 1941. . . . Pre-Flight Training, Sarasota, 1941-2. . . . Assigned: U.S.S. Stinger.*

... Lieutenant (j.g.) 1942. ... Group Citation. ... Personal Citation. ... Recommended for. ...

"It's your story," said the doctor carefully. "You know what it is you want me to believe. The trouble began, I understand, on your last bombing mission?"

"That's right. Or rather, that's when *my* troubles began. The thing's been going on for longer than that—much longer. Years, certainly; perhaps decades." Brady's fingers were like talons on the desk top. "Someone's got to *do* something, Doctor! Time is racing by, and with every passing day *They* grow stronger. I've got to make people understand—"

"At the beginning?" suggested Gorham. "Suppose you start with that unfortunate last flight."

His calm matter-of-fact tone had a soothing effect on the younger man. Brady's voice lost its high note of hysteria.

"Yes, sir," he said. "Very good, sir. Well, then, it was this way. We accomplished our mission and started for home—"

We accomplished our mission (said Lieutenant Brady) and started home. "Home" was, of course, the *Stinger*. I can tell you, now that the war's over, where we were and what we were doing. We were cruising the South China Sea, roughly off Palawan, between the Philippines and Indo-China. Our job was to harass enemy shipping in that area, breaking the life line between the Straits and the Nipponese home islands. Our task force was in position to support any one of a dozen land invasions from Labuan to Hainan, and our air arm periodically feinted at various concentration points to confuse the Japs.

Our latest target had been Songcau, and it was from this port we were returning when it happened.

We sighted a tramp beating her way up the coast, and I called the squadron leader for permission to unload a heavy I was carrying home unropped. He O.K.'d, and we peeled off. The freighter opened up on us with all she had as we came in, but she might as well have been throwing spit balls. We laid our egg down her aft stack, and she flew into pieces like one of those toys kids play with. You know—the kind you push a button, and *blooie!*

So that was that, and we were all talking it up and feeling pretty hot stuff when all of a sudden we discovered we were losing elevation like crazy. It seems the freighter had died like a rat, clawing in her death agony. A hunk of her exploding hide had slashed one of our wing tanks, and we were spraying gas all over the South China Sea.

Even then we weren't worried. The Navy watches out for its own, and we knew that an hour after we were forced to our life rafts, a rescue party would be out to pick us up. So we reported the bad news to the squadron leader and accepted his condolences philosophically; and with no great dismay watched the flight dwindle to black dots as we lurched along, coaxing every last possible mile out of our ruptured duck.

It would be annoying, we thought, and a nuisance. But it wouldn't be dangerous. That's what we thought.

That's what we thought, being logical guys. But in the South Pacific area you can toss logic and reason out the window.

About ten minutes after the flight had disappeared, and about one cupful of gas before we'd have to ditch, out of a bald, blue, breezeless nowhere came thundering mountains of cumulus, torrential cloudbursts of rain, and a shrieking hundred-mile gale that picked us up and whirled us like the button on a hen-coop door.

How long we rode that thing, I haven't the faintest idea. I had no time for clock-watching; I had all I could do holding the *Ardent Alice*—that was our ship's name—holding the *Ardent Alice's* nose steady in the face of that blast. It grabbed us, and shook us, and lifted and dropped us, and spun us as if we weighed ounces instead of tons. We had no way of climbing above the storm, of course; we just had to sit there and take it. At least a dozen times I was sure we were going to be slammed into the sea, but each time the unpredictable wind jerked us upstairs again to play with us some more.

All three of us were nerve-tattered, bone-bruised, and dog-sick from the storm's beating, and not one but would have cheerfully given up a year's shore leaves to be clear of this mess. And then, suddenly—as suddenly as it had sprung from nowhere—the typhoon passed. One minute we were standing on our ears in a maelstrom of wind and rain; the next, the skies were crystal clear and a benevolent sun beamed down on a blue tranquil sea, while under the shadow of our wing tips lay the pink-and-green sanctuary of a tropical island!

Gorham coughed politely, interrupting his patient.

"Pardon me, Lieutenant. I'd like to make a note of that. It may be important. An island? *What* island?"

Brady shrugged helplessly.

"I don't know, sir. We had been twisted, battered, bounced around so badly, and for so long, that none of us had any idea where we were. We might have been one mile or fifty—or five hundred!—from where the typhoon struck us."

His voice strengthened with purpose. "But wherever it is, we've got to find that island again. *Got* to! Because it's *Their* island. Unless we find it, and destroy *Them*—"

"Suppose," suggested the doctor quietly, "you go on with your story? You reached this uncharted island. And you landed safely, I take it?"

"That's right, sir. We landed safely on a sandy strip of beach—"

We landed safely (continued Lieutenant Brady) on a sandy strip of beach. We were jubilant at having made a safe harbor but uncertain as to just *how* safe the harbor was. We didn't know, you see, whether we'd been carried into friendly or enemy territory. In that Godforsaken corner of the world there was also the possibility that the island's inhabitants, if any, might be technically neutral but still dangerous. In other words, head-hunting aborigines.

Imagine our pleasure and surprise, then, when a few minutes after we'd landed we heard a cheerful hail and looked up to find white men approaching us from the wall of tropical foliage that spanned the beach.

They were smiling and unarmed, and they welcomed us in English with courteous enthusiasm. They had seen us land, said the head of their party—a youngish chap who introduced himself as Dr. Grove—and had hurried out to meet us in case anyone needed medical assistance.

I assured him we were all right, and that we needed only food, rest, and a means of communicating our whereabouts to our comrades, who by this time were undoubtedly fanned out over half the South Pacific searching for us.

He nodded. "Food and rest you shall have," he said heartily. "As for the other—those things take time in this primitive country. But we shall see; we shall see."

"We have a radio in the plane—" I began, but Jack Kavanaugh, our radioman, shook his head at me.

"*Did* have, Skipper! It went out just as we sighted the island. Must have got whanged around a bit in the storm."

"But you can fix it?"

"I suppose so. If it's nothing serious. I'll tell you better after I've had a chance to look it over."

"Of course," nodded Grove. "But in the meantime, I hope you'll accept our humble hospitality? We don't have the pleasure of entertaining new guests here very often. It will be good to chat with you all. If you'll follow me—"

There was nothing else to do. Like sheep being led to the slaughter—blindly trusting and without a struggle—we followed him off the beach into a winding jungle path.

It was Tom Goeller, my gunner, who first intimated there might be something wrong about this setup. Even *he* did not really suspect anything; he was just puzzled. He wondered aloud as we pushed forward: "Where from? I don't get it!"

"Don't get what?" I asked him. "What do you mean—where from? What's biting you, Tom?"

"That Grove character," grumbled Tom. "He said they saw us land. Only—where from? Where the hell do they live? In the trees? I had a good look at this island just before we landed. A good, long look—from topside. And I didn't see a sign of anything that looked like a house."

I said: "By God, you're right! I didn't, either. I wonder if—"

But my question was answered before I voiced it. We stopped, inexplicably, before a sort of concrete shelter under a sprawling banyan tree; a lean-to sort of business in mottled green and brown—so perfectly camouflaged to conform with its surroundings that you could hardly see it from ten yards away, much less from the air.

Dr. Grove smiled and said: "Here we are, gentlemen." He touched a button, and the shelter door swung open. "If you will be good enough to enter—"

Kavanaugh spoke up roughly. "Enter what? That?"

Grove laughed pleasantly. "Don't be alarmed. It's merely an elevator. The entrance is from ground level."

"An elevator!" I exclaimed. "In this jungle? What kind of monkey business is this, anyhow? Do you mean to tell me you live underground?"

"My dear Lieutenant," said the self-styled "Doctor" languidly, "I'll be glad to explain everything—later. It's all very simple. But first I must insist that you—"

"Oh!" I interrupted. "So now you are *insisting*, eh? And suppose we prefer not to step into your mysterious little parlor? Then what?"

"Then," sighed Dr. Grove, "I should be compelled—most regretfully—to enforce my request."

"That right?" I grunted. "Guess again, pal. There are more of you than us—but we happen to be armed." I took out my automatic and held it on him level. "That's one detail you seem to have overlooked. Now—"

"I overlook no details, Lieutenant," answered Grove quietly. "Would you be kind enough to fire your gun? If you have qualms against killing a man in cold blood"—his lips curled mockingly—"you might fire into the air."

I stared at him, baffled. He wasn't stalling. You can *feel* things like that. He was amused, superior, contemptuous. Goeller said: "Watch yourself, Skipper; it's a trick; He *wants* you to shoot. The sound will bring help."

Grove smiled. "Wrong, my friend. I need no help." He slipped a hand into his breast pocket. "Very well. Since you won't accept my invitation—"

Shooting was risky, but I had no choice. "O.K.," I snapped. "You asked for it!" And I squeezed the trigger. I froze on it, waiting for the blast, and the sight of his body crumpling before me.

But nothing happened!

Gorham, listening to this recital, blinked. "You mean," he suggested, "the gun missed fire—that it jammed?"

"I mean," said Brady helplessly, "it just didn't go off; that's all. It didn't miss fire. It didn't jam. There wasn't a thing wrong with it, mechanically. Later I took it down piece by piece and examined it. It was perfect. But it just wouldn't fire on that island."

Gorham said slowly: "It wouldn't fire—on that island?" His eyes on the younger man were cautious, and he was doodling thoughtfully on the pad before him. "But that's incredible! Why not?"

"I soon found out," said Brady grimly, "about that. About that and a lot of other things—"

I stood there (said Brady) speechless. I couldn't understand. At first I thought—like you—that my gun had jammed. Then suddenly I discovered that the other men had drawn their guns too—and that they too were staring incredulously at utterly futile weapons.

"You see?" shrugged Grove. "Now, perhaps you will be kind enough to step into the shaft?"

"Not on your life!" I blazed back. "I don't understand what's going on here. But whatever it is, I don't want any part of it. Come on, gang! Let's get out of here!"

"I'm sorry," said the doctor. "You force me to use harsh measures. Believe me, I do so reluctantly."

From his breast pocket he drew a slender tube about the size and shape of a fountain pen. He pointed it at me—at *us*, I should say, because from it suddenly flowed a silver cone of radiance.

I started to rush him, shouting something or other. But both shout and movement stopped abruptly as that curious, silvery radiance engulfed me. It wasn't a gas. It was odorless and tasteless; it did not burn or sting or cause pain in any way. But it was as though I had charged into an ocean of lambent cobwebs, to become enmeshed in a shroud of moonbeams. I could neither move nor speak; only my senses functioned.

As in a dream, I heard Dr. Grove bid his followers: "Place them in the shaft, Gently, please!" Then the feel of hands lifting, carrying me; they felt—how can I explain it?—they felt *far away* upon my body, as though layers of sponge rubber lay between their flesh and mine.

I could see, too, but only straight ahead of me, in the direction in which my pupils were fixed. I couldn't move my eyes. So I saw only that the interior of the elevator was of smooth, polished metal, anomalous in these surroundings. I heard the whine of an electric motor and sensed, rather than felt, the motion of our swift descent.

Dr. Grove leaned over me, thrusting himself into my line of vision.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant," he said. "I sincerely regret having had to inconvenience you. But, you see, firearms won't work on this island. No explosions of any kind are permitted—unless by special arrangement. We have means of hampering your primitive mechanical devices. That is why your guns did not fire, and why your radio will not operate."

I was filled with a thousand questions, but I could not ask them, not even with my eyes. "*What are these means?*" I wanted to ask him. "*And who, or what, are you that you should speak of a radio as a primitive mechanical device? Where are we going, and what are you planning to do with us?*" All these questions hammered at my brain, but my tongue was silent.

Then the sensation of movement stopped, I heard the elevator door slide open, and our captors lifted us again. I saw the metal ceilings of long, well-lighted corridors, and heard voices proclaiming the presence of many more persons in these subterranean vaults, and once was silent

witness to a conversation between Grove and someone apparently his superior.

"Well, Frater?"

"I'm sorry, Frater Dorden. It was necessary. They would not come willingly."

"I see." A sigh. "Few of them do. Ah, well—put them in sleeping chambers until they recover. . . . And be gentle. They are frightened, poor devils."

And then our journey continued through a maze of clean-gleaming metal corridors, until finally I was carried through a doorway and placed tenderly on a cot. A light covering was thrown over me; its pleasant warmth made me realize how weary I was. I could not close my eyes, but the lights were dimmed slowly, and at last in utter darkness I forgot my troubles in sleep. . . .

I do not know whether the return of lights awakened me, or whether some unseen control automatically brought back the illumination when I awoke. At any rate, I roused from my slumber to find the room bright again.

Even more important was the fact that I could move. I leaped from my cot and sprang to the door at the other side of the room but, as I had expected, it was locked. So I gave up, for the time being, any idea of attempting to escape and set myself to a study of my surroundings.

For one thing, I was alone. Apparently our captors had assigned each of us to a separate chamber, or cell. This one was Spartan in its simplicity. Four walls of a dull gray metallic substance I could not immediately identify—a floor of some resilient rubber or plastic composition—a low ceiling of the same material as the walls. A cot, a chair, and a desk were the only furnishings. There were no decorations on the walls; no carpet covered the floor; and of course—since we were underground—there were no windows.

What amazed me most was that there were no lighting fixtures. I looked in vain for any source from which originated the pleasant, unflickering illumination that flooded the room. I found nothing. It was no jiggery-pokery of indirect lighting, either. The flow of light was constant and, oddly enough, there were no shadows!

I think that's when I started to get frightened. I don't mean flabby-lipped, knock-kneed scared, but *cold*. Cold and awed and numb, like—well, the way a trapped rabbit must feel when it sees the hunter approaching.

These persons, these men who spoke with indifferent contempt of mankind's finest accomplishments, who regretfully and casually employed weapons and tools unknown to science—who were they? And why had we been separated? Where were my comrades—Kavanaugh and Goeller? Suddenly, desperately, I needed the reassurance of their presence.

I raised my voice and shouted. There was no reply. The impassive walls should have echoed the panic in my voice, being metal. But, like everything else in this strange place, it behaved unnaturally. It absorbed the sound, sopping it up as a sponge absorbs water.

I shouted again and again. Fruitlessly, I thought. But not fruitlessly. For suddenly I heard the faintest sound behind me and whirled. Dr. Grove was stepping through the wall.

Lieutenant Brady stopped abruptly, as if in anticipation of his listener's reaction. It came. Gorham, despite his training as a psychiatrist, stopped doodling and tossed a swift, anxious frown at the younger man.

With an obvious effort he erased the sudden pursing of his lips. He said quietly: "Through the *wall*, Lieutenant? Of course you mean through the *door*?"

"Through the wall," said Brady dully. "Through the wall, sir. The door was in front of me. But Dr. Grove stepped into my cell through the solid metal wall."

"You realize," said Gorham, "that what you are saying is impossible?"

"To us"—Brady's eyes were haggard—"it is. To *Them*, nothing is impossible. Nothing! Or very little. That is why we must act, and act *now*! Before it is too late. You must believe me, sir! This is man's last chance—"

"I'll do my best," promised Gorham. "Perhaps you'd better continue? This Dr. Grove stepped through the wall—"

I'll cut it short (said Brady wanly). I'll tell it as quickly as I can. I'm just wasting your time and mine. I can tell by your eyes that you don't believe me. But someone must. Somewhere, somehow, sometime—someone must. . . . Well, as I was saying, Dr. Grove stepped through the wall. And strange as it may sound, in that moment my panic ended. I still *feared*; yes. But I feared as a man fears a god, or a demon, or a raw and elemental force beyond his comprehension. I did not look on him with dread, as one watches a human foe charge upon him with flaming gun or blood stained sword; I looked on him with awe, know-

ing him to be as far above and beyond me in the life scale as I am superior to a dog or a beast of burden.

So it was we talked—not as man to man, but as man to a lesser creature. And *I* was the lesser creature. He was the master, I the serf. And he told me many things. . . .

Has it ever occurred to you, Doctor, that we humans are an egotistic race? Our Darwins and our Huxleys have told us we are the product of a steady, progressive evolution—an evolution that started in primeval slime and has gradually developed to our present proud and self-proclaimed status as *homo sapiens*.

Homo sapiens—intelligent man! . . . But perhaps we are not so intelligent, at that. For in our blind folly we have assumed ourselves to be the final and glorious end product of Nature's eternal striving toward perfection!

Could we not guess that the same force which led the first lungfish from primordial ooze to solid earth—the force which evolved the Neanderthal man from his bestial, hairy ancestor, and developed from this rock-hurling cave man a race that works its destruction with atomic fission—could we not have guessed that this force would inevitably progress a step farther?

That is what has happened. There dwells upon earth today a race representing the *next step* in man's progress. A people to whom our thoughts are as immature and elementary as to us is the prattling of infants.

They begin where we leave off. Our vaunted physics and mathematics are their nursery ABC's; the hard-won learning of our best brains is theirs intuitively. They *sense* what we must study; and what they must study, we cannot even begin to grasp. They are the new lords of creation—*homo superior*!

How they came to be, that is one thing even they do not know. There is a force called "mutation" which you, as a doctor, must understand better than I. By mutation a white rose appears among red, and the white breed true from that time on. The new men are mutants. They—or the first of them—were born of normal parents. But from the cradle they sensed that they were different. Having a telepathic instinct, they were able to discern their brothers in a crowd—or even over long distances—and they banded together.

Long ago—how long Dr. Grove did not tell me—the new men decided they must isolate themselves from us. It was a logical decision.

They had no more in common with us than we have with our pets. Few men, by choice, dine with dogs or sleep in stables.

So they sought this secluded island in the Pacific, far from lesser man's civilization. They went underground to escape detection. There they live, and study, and learn, and wait with infinite patience for the day when they must emerge and take over the world which is theirs by inheritance—even as *homo sapiens* took it from his beetle-browed forebear, the ape man.

"We are few in number," Grove told me, "but we increase with each passing year. Some are born here; others come from the four corners of the earth, drawn to us by mental *rapport*. Soon we will be many enough, and strong enough, to accept the responsibility of government of all the earth."

"You mean," I said "destroy man? And claim the entire world for yourselves?"

Grove said almost sadly: "How little you understand us, you humans. Do you destroy the animals of the field just because they are not your intellectual peers? Our obligation is to keep and protect you; to act as your friendly guardians in a world that will be strange to you, and frightening.

"Yes, frightening," he went on as I began some protest. "I saw the dread and horror in your eyes when I walked into the room. You did not understand how I passed through a wall that to you seems solid. Not understanding, you feared.

"Yet there is nothing supernatural or fearful about what I did; about what any of us can do at will. There is no such thing as a solid in a universe wherein all things—size and dimension and substance—are but relative. *We* know there is room and to spare for the molecules comprising our persons to pass unhindered through the molecules comprising these walls. We simply make a necessary mental adjustment—and walk where we will. It is an ability as basic, as fundamental, to us as breathing is to a person like you."

"Then what," I asked him, "is your plan for man?"

"Your question should be," he replied gently, "what is Nature's plan for man? And I believe the question answers itself. The answer lies in history. What became of Nature's earlier experiments: the giant reptiles, the anthropoids, the men who dwelt in caves and trees?"

"They died out," I said. "Civilization passed them by. They fell before the onrush of higher life forms."

"Even so," Grove said regretfully. "Even so. But you have our pledge that we will be kind. We will be kind."

You see, that was the essence of the matter. These new men are intelligent, a thousandfold more intelligent than we. And being that great step farther along the path to perfection, they are born with the instinct to gentleness. That is why their weapons anesthetize, but do not harm. They will not, they *cannot*, kill.

I could go on for hours relating what I heard and saw during the three weeks I was prisoner in the subterranean refuge of the new men. I'll tell only a few things, because I can see you—like all the others—think I am mad. But there are some things you should know.

Those metal cells hold more than two hundred humans like you and me, men and women who have stumbled by accident upon the hide-away island and have been restrained there lest they go back and tell the world of the conquest to come.

They are comfortable, of course. They are well fed and housed, entertained and made as happy as possible—under the circumstances. Men do not ruthlessly destroy their pets. And on that island, men are the wards of supermen.

I could quote names that would amaze you. A famous author and traveler whose ship disappeared some years ago in the Pacific—a big-game hunter supposedly killed—an aviatrix for whom a dozen fleets sought in vain. They are there.

I could tell you something else that would make the small hairs creep on the back of your neck—if you dared let yourself believe it. *They* are here among us already, the new men. As their hour of ascendancy approaches, they are paving the way for their bloodless conquest. Some of them have left the island and taken their places in our world. You can see the master plan. A handful of them settled in key spots—here a politician, there an industrial magnate, there an author whose every word is gospel to his readers—what chance has a race of underlings to combat them when they strike?

And they *will* strike, and soon. When they do, that will be our end as the rulers of earth. For they cannot fail in anything they try. We, as a people, are strong. But *They* are omnipotent!

"That is why," concluded Brady, "you've got to make yourself believe me, no matter how crazy this sounds. You've *got* to, Doctor. From the broader point of view, perhaps it's better they should inherit the earth. But I am a human. And as a member of my race, I do not want to fall before a higher culture, no matter how superior.

"I want to live! And if we want to live, *They* must die. Their island must be destroyed, utterly and completely. An atomic bomb—"

"You have said," interrupted Dr. Gorham, "that they are omnipotent. You have called them wise with the wisdom of demigods. Yet you escaped from their island without outside help. Is that proof of their superhuman intelligence?"

Brady shook his head.

"It is proof of their great kindness, and my animal cunning.

"There is a chink in their armor. I took advantage of it. They cannot willfully cause any creature pain. Knowing this, I begged Grove to take me to the surface so I could get some things from the *Ardent Alice* one day. Some personal belongings, I told him. Pictures of my loved ones that I had hidden in a secret compartment of the plane.

He agreed. We had been on friendly terms for some weeks; and he suspected no treachery. That is a human trait. They cannot conceive of guile or deceit.

"He was careless, and I was desperate. He turned to look when I cried out and pointed to something behind him; he never knew what hit him. I don't know whether my rock killed him or not. I hope not.

"The plane, of course, was useless. But there were self-inflating life rafts, and the water was only yards away. I paddled from that devil's shore with the strength of a madman. You know the rest: How my food and water ran out. How they found me raving deliriously days or maybe weeks later, bearded and sun-blistered and more than half dead."

Dr. Gorham nodded and quietly closed the memo book in which he had scratched only doodles.

"Yes," he said quietly. "Yes. It must have been a terrible experience." He rose.

"Well, Lieutenant—" he said awkwardly.

Lieutenant Brady stared at him with hopeless eyes.

"You don't believe me, either," he said. "Do you?"

"It's been a pleasure listening to your story," the medico said. "I'll make a report to my superiors. Please be patient and try not to worry. Good day, Lieutenant."

"Go to hell!" said Lieutenant Brady dully. "Oh, go to hell—" he added mechanically—"sir."

The doctor stiffened, then gazed compassionately at the younger man for an instant, shrugged, and left the narrow chamber.

Outside, another medical officer greeted him.

"Ah, there, Gorham! You've talked with him? What's the verdict?"

Gorham touched his forehead. "A clear case of persecution mania—an amazing form. I've never heard a tale so complete and logical, but—" He shrugged. "Do what you can for him. I'm afraid he's going to be here for a long time—perhaps for as long as he lives. Turned loose, he might be dangerous."

The other medical officer shook his head.

"Tough! A nice boy, too. But it does nasty things to a man, floating for weeks in a life raft. He was the only one of his crew to survive. Well, Doctor—will you lunch with me?"

"No, thanks," said Gorham. "I've got to run along. Have to turn in a report and a recommendation on this case."

"Of course. See you later, then."

The other medico disappeared down the spotless corridor of the mental ward. Gorham pondered briefly, orienting himself. He was in the west wing of the hospital, facing the street. His car stood at the curb just outside. He was very busy. There was so much work to be done; so much. And if he walked through the anteroom, some fool was sure to delay him, drag him into a long-winded discussion. He didn't feel a bit like talking. He wanted to get out of this place and forward his report—his report that the Brady case was closed. That there would be no more trouble from that source.

He glanced swiftly up and down the corridor. There was no one in sight. His senses told him the street was also deserted. There was no danger of his being seen. So—

So Dr. Gorham turned and walked quietly through the wall.

We do not usually think of fairy tales as something that can also be written for grown-up consumption, and there are very few who dare to try. Lord Dunsany in several wonderful little books succeeds admirably in adapting this genre, beloved of childhood, to the fantasy tastes of adult readers. So here we have a knight in quest of treasure—and yet we don't think we'd care to recommend this tale for children's reading.

The Hoard of the Gibbelins

by Lord Dunsany



THE GIBBELINS eat, as is well known, nothing less good than man. Their evil tower is joined to Terra Cognita, to the lands we know, by a bridge. Their hoard is beyond reason; avarice has no use for it; they have a separate cellar for sapphires; they have filled a hole with gold and dig it up when they need it. And the only use that is known for their ridiculous wealth is to attract to their larder a continual supply of food. In times of famine they have even been known to scatter rubies abroad, a little trail of them to some city of Man, and sure enough their larders would soon be full again.

Their tower stands on the other side of that river known to Homer—Ocean, as he called it—which surrounds the world. And where the river is narrow and fordable the tower was built by the Gibbelins' gluttonous sires, for they liked to see burglars rowing easily to their steps. Some nourishment that common soil has not the huge trees drained there with their colossal roots from both banks of the river.

There the Gibbelins lived and discredibly fed.

Alderic, Knight of the Order of the City and the Assault, hereditary

Guardian of the King's Peace of Mind, a man not unremembered among the makers of myth, pondered so long upon the Gibbelins' hoard that by now he deemed it his. Alas that I should say of so perilous a venture, undertaken at dead of night by a valorous man, that its motive was sheer avarice! Yet upon avarice only the Gibbelins relied to keep their larders full, and once in every hundred years sent spies into the cities of men to see how avarice did, and always the spies returned again to the tower saying that all was well.

It may be thought that, as the years went on and men came by fearful ends on that tower's wall, fewer and fewer would come to the Gibbelins' table: but the Gibbelins found otherwise.

Not in the folly and frivolity of his youth did Alderic come to the tower, but he studied carefully for several years the manner in which burglars met their doom when they went in search of the treasure that he considered his. *In every case they had entered by the door.*

He consulted those who gave advice on this quest; he noted every detail and cheerfully paid their fees, and determined to do nothing that they advised, for what were their clients now? No more than examples of the savoury art, mere half-forgotten memories of a meal; and many, perhaps, no longer even that.

These were the requisites for the quest that these men used to advise: a horse, a boat, mail armour, and at least three men-at-arms. Some said, "Blow the horn at the tower door"; others said, "Do not touch it."

Alderic thus decided: he would take no horse down to the river's edge, he would not row along it in a boat, and he would go alone and by way of the Forest Unpassable.

How pass, you may say, by the unpassable? This was his plan: there was a dragon he knew of who if peasants' prayers are heeded deserved to die, not alone because of the number of maidens he cruelly slew, but because he was bad for the crops; he ravaged the very land and was the bane of a dukedom.

Now Alderic determined to go up against him. So he took horse and spear and pricked till he met the dragon, and the dragon came out against him breathing bitter smoke. And to him Alderic shouted, "Hath foul dragon ever slain true knight?" And well the dragon knew that this had never been, and he hung his head and was silent, for he was glutted with blood. "Then," said the knight, "if thou would'st ever taste maiden's blood again thou shalt be my trusty steed, and if not, by this spear there shall befall thee all that the troubadours tell of the dooms of thy breed."

And the dragon did not open his ravening mouth, nor rush upon the knight, breathing out fire; for well he knew the fate of those that did these things, but he consented to the terms imposed, and swore to the knight to become his trusty steed.

It was on a saddle upon this dragon's back that Alderic afterwards sailed above the unpassable forest, even above the tops of those measureless trees, children of wonder. But first he pondered that subtle plan of his which was more profound than merely to avoid all that had been done before; and he commanded a blacksmith, and the blacksmith made him a pickaxe.

Now there was great rejoicing at the rumour of Alderic's quest, for all folk knew that he was a cautious man, and they deemed that he would succeed and enrich the world, and they rubbed their hands in the cities at the thought of largesse; and there was joy among all men in Alderic's country, except perchance among the lenders of money, who feared they would soon be paid. And there was rejoicing also because men hoped that when the Gibbelins were robbed of their hoard, they would shatter their high-built bridge and break the golden chains that bound them to the world, and drift back, they and their tower, to the moon, from which they had come and to which they rightly belonged. There was little love for the Gibbelins, though all men envied their hoard.

So they all cheered, that day when he mounted his dragon, as though he was already a conqueror, and what pleased them more than the good that they hoped he would do to the world was that he scattered gold as he rode away; for he would not need it, he said, if he found the Gibbelins' hoard, and he would not need it more if he smoked on the Gibbelins' table.

When they heard that he had rejected the advice of those that gave it, some said that the knight was mad, and others said he was greater than those that gave the advice, but none appreciated the worth of his plan.

He reasoned thus: for centuries men had been well advised and had gone by the cleverest way, while the Gibbelins came to expect them to come by boat and to look for them at the door whenever their larder was empty, even as a man looketh for a snipe in the marsh; but how, said Alderic, if a snipe should sit in the top of a tree, and would men find him there? Assuredly never! So Alderic decided to swim the river and not to go by the door, but to pick his way into the tower through the stone. Moreover, it was in his mind to work below the level of the

ocean, the river (as Homer knew) that girdles the world, so that as soon as he made a hole in the wall the water should pour in, confounding the Gibbelins, and flooding the cellars rumoured to be twenty feet in depth, and therein he would dive for emeralds as a diver dives for pearls.

And on the day that I tell of he galloped away from his home scattering largesse of gold, as I have said, and passed through many kingdoms, the dragon snapping at maidens as he went, but being unable to eat them because of the bit in his mouth, and earning no gentler reward than a spurthrust where he was softest. And so they came to the swart arboreal precipice of the unpassable forest. The dragon rose at it with a rattle of wings. Many a farmer near the edge of the world saw him up there where yet the twilight lingered, a faint, black, wavering line; and mistaking him for a row of geese going inland from the ocean, went into their houses cheerily rubbing their hands and saying that winter was coming, and that we should soon have snow. Soon even there the twilight faded away, and when they descended at the edge of the world it was night and the moon was shining. Ocean, the ancient river, narrow and shallow there, flowed by and made no murmur. Whether the Gibbelins banqueted or whether they watched by the door, they also made no murmur. And Alderic dismounted and took his armour off, and saying one prayer to his lady, swam with his pickaxe. He did not part from his sword, for fear that he met with a Gibbelin. Landed the other side, he began to work at once, and all went well with him. Nothing put out its head from any window, and all were lighted so that nothing within could see him in the dark. The blows of his pickaxe were dulled in the deep walls. All night he worked, no sound came to molest him, and at dawn the last rock swerved and tumbled inwards, and the river poured in after. Then Alderic took a stone, and went to the bottom step, and hurled the stone at the door; he heard the echoes roll into the tower, then he ran back and dived through the hole in the wall.

He was in the emerald-cellar. There was no light in the lofty vault above him, but, diving through twenty feet of water, he felt the floor all rough with emeralds, and open coffers full of them. By a faint ray of the moon he saw that the water was green with them, and, easily filling a satchel, he rose again to the surface; and there were the Gibbelins waist-deep in the water, with torches in their hands! And, without saying a word, or even smiling, they neatly hanged him on the outer wall—and the tale is one of those that have not a happy ending.

Tales of the sea, of the deep waters, of the unending horizon, are rife with the inexplicable, the mysterious. Seamen seem to absorb something from the endless expanses that touch their imaginations and produce yarns unlike those of land-locked men. Perhaps it is the loneliness of ships that makes this difference, so that when a ship sinks, often no others in the world will know of it, and it will seem as inexplicable a disappearance as if some power of evil had grasped the vessel and all its hapless crew and snatched them from the face of the earth. And those chilling apparitions of the waters, derelicts, give added power to this feeling, like corpses that refuse to be buried. William Hope Hodgson, who knew the sea as only a seaman could, clothes one of these derelicts with such a throb of terror as will make this story one that you will remember for a long time after.

The Derelict

by William Hope Hodgson



IT'S THE *Material*," said the old ship's doctor. . . . "The *Material*, plus the Conditions; and, maybe," he added slowly, "a third factor—yes, a third factor; but there, there. . . ." He broke off his half-meditative sentence, and began to charge his pipe.

"Go on, Doctor," we said, encouragingly, and with more than a little expectancy. We were in the smoke-room of the *Sand-a-lea*, running across the North Atlantic; and the Doctor was a character. He concluded the charging of his pipe, and lit it; then settled himself, and began to express himself more fully:—

"The *Material*," he said, with conviction, "is inevitably the medium of expression of the Life-Force—the fulcrum, as it were; lacking which, it is unable to exert itself, or, indeed, to express itself in any form or fashion that would be intelligible or evident to us.

"So potent is the share of the *Material* in the production of that thing which we name Life, and so eager the Life-Force to express itself, that I am convinced it would, if given the right Conditions, make itself manifest even through so hopeless-seeming a medium as a simple block of sawn wood; for I tell you, gentlemen, the Life-Force is both as fiercely

urgent and as indiscriminate as Fire—the Destructor; yet which some are now growing to consider the very essence of Life rampant. . . . There is a quaint seeming paradox there,” he concluded, nodding his old grey head.

“Yes, Doctor,” I said. “In brief, your argument is that Life is a thing, state, fact, or element, call-it-what-you-like, which requires the *Material* through which to manifest itself, and that given the *Material*, plus the Conditions, the result is Life. In other words, that Life is an evolved product, manifested through Matter, and bred of Conditions—eh?”

“As we understand the word,” said the old Doctor. “Though, mind you, there *may* be a third factor. But, in my heart, I believe that it is a matter of chemistry; Conditions and a suitable medium; but given the Conditions, the Brute is so almighty that it will seize upon anything through which to manifest itself. It is a Force generated by Conditions; but nevertheless this does not bring us one iota nearer to its *explanation*, any more than to the explanation of Electricity or Fire. They are, all three, of the Outer Forces—Monsters of the Void. Nothing we can do will *create* any one of them; our power is merely to be able, by providing the Conditions, to make each one of them manifest to our physical senses. Am I clear?”

“Yes, Doctor, in a way you are,” I said. “But I don’t agree with you; though I think I understand you. Electricity and Fire are both what I might call natural things; but Life is an abstract something—a kind of all-permeating Wakefulness. Oh, I can’t explain it; who could! But it’s spiritual; not just a thing bred out of a Condition, like Fire, as you say, or Electricity. It’s a horrible thought of yours. Life’s a kind of spiritual mystery. . . .”

“Easy, my boy!” said the old Doctor, laughing gently to himself; “or else I may be asking you to demonstrate the spiritual mystery of life of the limpet, or the crab, shall we say.”

He grinned at me, with ineffable perverseness. “Anyway,” he continued, “as I suppose you’ve all guessed, I’ve a yarn to tell you in support of my impression that Life is no more a mystery or a miracle than Fire or Electricity. But, please to remember, gentlemen, that because we’ve succeeded in naming and making good use of these two Forces, they’re just as much mysteries, fundamentally, as ever. And, anyway, the thing I’m going to tell you, won’t explain the mystery of Life; but only give you one of my pegs on which I hang my feeling that Life is, as I have said, a Force made manifest through Conditions (that is to say, natural Chemistry), and that it can take for its purpose and Need,

the most incredible and unlikely Matter; for without Matter, it cannot come into existence—it cannot become manifest. . . .”

“I don’t agree with you, Doctor,” I interrupted. “Your theory would destroy all belief in life after death. It would. . . .”

“Hush, sonny,” said the old man, with a quiet little smile of comprehension. “Hark to what I’ve to say first; and, anyway, what objection have you to material life, after death; and if you object to a material framework, I would still have you remember that I am speaking of Life, as we understand the word in this our life. Now do be a quiet lad, or I’ll never be done:—

“It was when I was a young man, and that is a good many years ago, gentlemen. I had passed my examinations; but was so run down with overwork, that it was decided that I had better take a trip to sea. I was by no means well off, and very glad, in the end, to secure a nominal post as Doctor in a sailing passenger-clipper, running out to China.

“The name of the ship was the *Bheotpte*, and soon after I had got all my gear aboard, she cast off, and we dropped down the Thames, and next day were well away out in the Channel.

“The Captain’s name was Gannington, a very decent man; though quite illiterate. The First Mate, Mr. Berlies, was a quiet, sternish, reserved man, very well-read. The Second Mate, Mr. Selvern, was, perhaps, by birth and upbringing, the most socially cultured of the three; but he lacked the stamina and indomitable pluck of the two others. He was more of a sensitive; and emotionally and even mentally, the most alert man of the three.

“On our way out, we called at Madagascar, where we landed some of our passengers; then we ran Eastward, meaning to call at North West Cape; but about a hundred degrees East, we encountered very dreadful weather, which carried away all our sails and sprung the jibboom and fore t’gallant mast.

“The storm carried us Northward for several hundred miles, and when it dropped us finally, we found ourselves in a very bad state. The ship had been strained, and had taken some three feet of water through her seams; the main top-mast had been sprung, in addition to the jibboom and fore t’gallant mast; two of our boats had gone, as also one of the pigsties (with three fine pigs), this latter having been washed overboard but some half hour before the wind began to ease, which it did quickly; though a very ugly sea ran for some hours after.

“The wind left us just before dark, and when morning came, it brought splendid weather; a calm, mildly undulating sea, and a bril-

liant sun, with no wind. It showed us also that we were not alone; for about two miles away to the Westward, was another vessel, which Mr. Selvern, the Second Mate, pointed out to me.

"That's a pretty rum looking packet, Doctor," he said, and handed me his glass. I looked through it, at the other vessel, and saw what he meant; at least, I thought I did.

"Yes, Mr. Selvern," I said, 'she's got a pretty old-fashioned look about her.'

"He laughed at me, in his pleasant way.

"It's easy to see you're not a sailor, Doctor," he remarked. 'There's a dozen rum things about her. She's a derelict, and has been floating round, by the look of her, for many a score of years. Look at the shape of her counter, and the bows and cut-water. She's as old as the hills, as you might say, and ought to have gone down to Davy Jones a long time ago. Look at the growths on her, and the thickness of her standing rigging; that's all salt encrustations, I fancy, if you notice the white colour. She's been a small barque; but don't you see she's not a yard left aloft. They've all dropped out of the slings; everything rotted away; wonder the standing rigging hasn't gone too. I wish the Old Man would let us take the boat, and have a look at her; she'd be well worth it.'

"There seemed little chance, however, of this; for all hands were turned-to and kept hard at it all day long, repairing the damage to the masts and gear, and this took a long while, as you may think. Part of the time, I gave a hand, heaving on one of the deck-capstans; for the exercise was good for my liver. Old Captain Gannington approved, and I persuaded him to come along and try some of the same medicine, which he did; and we grew very chummy over the job.

"We got talking about the derelict, and he remarked how lucky we were not to have run full tilt on to her, in the darkness; for she lay right away to leeward of us, according to the way that we had been drifting in the storm. He also was of the opinion that she had a strange look about her, and that she was pretty old; but on this latter point, he plainly had far less knowledge than the Second Mate; for he was, as I have said, an illiterate man, and knew nothing of sea-craft, beyond what experience had taught him. He lacked the book-knowledge which the Second Mate had, of vessels previous to his day, which it appeared the derelict was.

"She's an old 'un, Doctor," was the extent of his observations in this direction.

"Yet, when I mentioned to him that it would be interesting to go aboard, and give her a bit of an overhaul, he nodded his head, as if the idea had been already in his mind, and accorded with his own inclinations.

"'When the work's over, Doctor,' he said. 'Can't spare the men now, ye know. Got to get all ship-shape an' ready as smart as we can. But we'll take my gig, an' go off in the Second Dog Watch. The glass is steady, an' it'll be a bit of gam for us.'

"That evening, after tea, the captain gave orders to clear the gig and get her overboard. The Second Mate was to come with us, and the Skipper gave him word to see that two or three lamps were put into the boat, as it would soon fall dark. A little later, we were pulling across the calmness of the sea, with a crew of six at the oars, and making very good speed of it.

"Now, gentlemen, I have detailed to you with great exactness, all the facts, both big and little, so that you can follow step by step each incident in this extraordinary affair; and I want you now to pay the closest attention.

"I was sitting in the stern-sheets, with the Second Mate, and the Captain, who was steering; and as we drew nearer and nearer to the stranger, I studied her with an ever growing attention, as, indeed, did Captain Gannington and the Second Mate. She was, as you know, to the Westward of us, and the sunset was making a great flame of red light to the back of her, so that she showed a little blurred and indistinct, by reason of the halation of the light; which almost defeated the eye in any attempt to see her rotting spars and standing-rigging, submerged as they were in the fiery glory of the sunset.

"It was because of this effect of the sunset, that we had come quite close, comparatively, to the derelict, before we saw that she was all surrounded by a sort of curious scum, the colour of which was difficult to decide upon, by reason of the red light that was in the atmosphere; but which afterwards we discovered to be brown. This scum spread all about the old vessel for many hundreds of yards, in a huge, irregular patch, a great stretch of which reached out to the Eastward, upon our starboard side, some score, or so, fathoms away.

"'Queer stuff,' said Captain Gannington, leaning to the side, and looking over. 'Something in the cargo as 'as gone rotten an' worked out through 'er seams.'

"'Look at her bows and stern,' said the Second Mate; 'just look at the growth on her.'

"There were, as he said, great clumpings of strange-looking sea-fungi under the bows and the short counter astern. From the stump of her jibboom and her cutwater; great beards of rime and marine-growths hung downward into the scum that held her in. Her blank starboard side was presented to us, all a dead, dirtyish white, streaked and mottled vaguely with dull masses of heavier colour.

"There's a steam or haze rising off her,' said the Second Mate, speaking again; 'you can see it against the light. It keeps coming and going. Look!'

"I saw then what he meant—a faint haze or steam, either suspended above the old vessel, or rising from her; and Captain Gannington saw it also:—

"Spontaneous combustion!' he exclaimed. 'We'll 'ave to watch w'en we lift the 'atches; 'nless it's some poor devil that's got aboard of 'er; but that ain't likely.'

"We were now within a couple of hundred yards of the old derelict, and had entered into the brown scum. As it poured off the lifted oars, I heard one of the men mutter to himself:—'dam treacle!' and, indeed, it was something like it. As the boat continued to forge nearer and nearer to the old ship, the scum grew thicker and thicker; so that, at last, it perceptibly slowed us.

"Give way, lads! Put some beef to it!' sung out Captain Gannington; and thereafter there was no sound, except the panting of the men, and the faint, reiterated suck, suck, of the sullen brown scum upon the oars, as the boat was forced ahead. As we went, I was conscious of a peculiar smell in the evening air, and whilst I had no doubt that the puddling of the scum, by the oars, made it rise, I felt that in some way, it was vaguely familiar; yet I could give it no name.

"We were now very close to the old vessel, and presently she was high above us, against the dying light. The Captain called out then to:—'in with the bow oars, and stand-by with the boat-hook,' which was done.

"Aboard there! Ahoy! Aboard there! Ahoy!' shouted Captain Gannington; but there came no answer, only the flat sound of his voice going lost into the open sea, each time he sung out.

"Ahoy; Aboard there! Ahoy!' he shouted, time after time; but there was only the weary silence of the old hulk that answered us; and, somehow as he shouted, the while that I stared up half expectantly at her, a queer little sense of oppression, that amounted almost to nervousness, came upon me. It passed; but I remember how I was suddenly

aware that it was growing dark. Darkness comes fairly rapidly in the tropics; though not so quickly as many fiction-writers seem to think; but it was not that the coming dusk had perceptibly deepened in that brief time, of only a few moments, but rather that my nerves had made me suddenly a little hypersensitive. I mention my state particularly; for I am not a nervy man, normally; and my abrupt touch of nerves is significant, in the light of what happened.

"There's no one aboard there!" said Captain Gannington. 'Give way, men!' For the boat's crew had instinctively rested on their oars; as the Captain hailed the old craft. The men gave way again; and then the Second Mate called out excitedly:—"Why, look there, there's our pigsty! See, it's got *Bheotpte* painted on the end. It's drifted down here, and the scum's caught it. What a blessed wonder!"

"It was, as he had said, our pigsty that had been washed overboard in the storm; and most extraordinary to come across it there.

"We'll tow it off with us, when we go," remarked the Captain, and shouted to the crew to get-down to their oars; for they were hardly moving the boat, because the scum was so thick, close in around the old ship, that it literally clogged the boat from going ahead. I remember that it struck me, in a half-conscious sort of way, as curious that the pigsty, containing our three dead pigs, had managed to drift in so far, unaided, whilst we could scarcely manage to *force* the boat in; now that we had come right into the scum. But the thought passed from my mind; for so many things happened within the next few minutes.

"The men managed to bring the boat in alongside, within a couple of feet of the derelict, and the man with the boat-hook, hooked on.

"Ave ye got 'old there, forrard?" asked Captain Gannington.

"Yessir!" said the bow-man; and as he spoke, there came a queer noise of tearing.

"What's that?" asked the Captain.

"It's tore, Sir. Tore clean away!" said the man; and his tone showed that he had received something of a shock.

"Get a hold again then!" said Captain Gannington, irritably. 'You don't s'pose this packet was built yesterday! Shove the hook into the main chains.' The man did so, gingerly, as you might say; for it seemed to me, in the growing dusk, that he put no strain on to the hook; though, of course, there was no need; you see, the boat could not go very far, of herself, in the stuff in which she was embedded. I remember thinking this, also, as I looked up at the bulging side of the old vessel. Then I heard Captain Gannington's voice:—

"'Lord! but she's old! An' what a colour, Doctor! She don't half want paint, do she! . . . Now then, somebody, one of them oars.'

"An oar was passed to him, and he leant it up against the ancient, bulging side; then he paused, and called to the Second Mate to light a couple of the lamps, and stand-by to pass them up; for darkness had settled down now upon the sea.

"The Second Mate lit two of the lamps, and told one of the men to light a third, and keep it handy in the boat; then he stepped across, with a lamp in each hand, to where Captain Gannington stood by the oar against the side of the ship.

"'Now, my lad,' said the Captain, to the man who had pulled stroke, 'up with you, an' we'll pass ye up the lamps.'

"The man jumped to obey; caught the oar, and put his weight upon it, and as he did so, something seemed to give a little.

"'Look!' cried out the Second Mate, and pointed, lamp in hand . . . 'It's sunk in!'

"This was true. The oar had made quite an indentation into the bulging, somewhat slimy side of the old vessel.

"'Mould, I reckon,' said Captain Gannington, bending towards the derelict, to look. Then, to the man:—

"'Up you go, my lad, and be smart. . . . Don't stand there waitin'!

"At that, the man, who had paused a moment as he felt the oar give beneath his weight, began to shin up, and in a few seconds he was aboard, and leant out over the rail for the lamps. These were passed up to him, and the Captain called to him to steady the oar. Then Captain Gannington went, calling to me to follow, and after me the Second Mate.

"As the Captain put his face over the rail, he gave a cry of astonishment:—

"'Mould, by gum! Mould. . . . Tons of it! . . . Good Lord!'

"As I heard him shout that, I scrambled the more eagerly after him, and in a moment or two, I was able to see what he meant— Everywhere that the light from the two lamps struck, there was nothing but smooth great masses and surfaces of a dirty-white mould.

"I climbed over the rail, with the Second Mate close behind, and stood upon the mould-covered decks. There might have been no planking beneath the mould, for all that our feet could feel. It gave under our tread, with a spongy, puddingy feel. It covered the deck-furniture of the old ship, so that the shape of each article and fitment was often no more than suggested through it.

"Captain Gannington snatched a lamp from the man, and the Second Mate reached for the other. They held the lamps high, and we all stared. It was most extraordinary, and, somehow, most abominable. I can think of no other word, gentlemen, that so much describes the predominant feeling that affected me at the moment.

"'Good Lord!' said Captain Gannington, several times. 'Good Lord!' But neither the Second Mate nor the man said anything, and for my part I just stared, and at the same time began to smell a little at the air; for there was again a vague odour of something half familiar, that somehow brought to me a sense of half-known fright.

"I turned this way and that, staring, as I have said. Here and there, the mould was so heavy as to entirely disguise what lay beneath; converting the deck-fittings into indistinguishable mounds of mould, all dirty-white, and blotched and veined with irregular, dull purplish markings.

"There was a strange thing about the mould, which Captain Gannington drew attention to—it was that our feet did not crush into it and break the surface, as might have been expected; but merely indented it.

"'Never seen nothin' like it before! . . . Never!' said the Captain, after having stooped with his lamp to examine the mould under our feet. He stamped with his heel, and the stuff gave out a dull, puddingy sound. He stooped again, with a quick movement, and stared, holding the lamp close to the deck. 'Blest, if it ain't a reg'lar skin to it!' he said.

"The Second Mate and the man and I all stooped, and looked at it. The Second Mate prodded it with his forefinger, and I remember I rapped it several times with my knuckles, listening to the dead sound it gave out, and noticing the close, firm texture of the mould.

"'Dough!' said the Second Mate. 'It's just like blessed dough! . . . Pouff!' He stood up with a quick movement. 'I could fancy it stinks a bit,' he said.

"As he said this, I knew suddenly what the familiar thing was, in the vague odour that hung about us—It was that the smell had something animal-like in it; something of the same smell, only *heavier*, that you will smell in any place that is infested with mice. I began to look about with a sudden very real uneasiness. . . . There might be vast numbers of hungry rats aboard. . . . They might prove exceedingly dangerous, if in a starving condition; yet, as you will understand, somehow I hesitated to put forward my idea as a reason for caution; it was too fanciful.

"Captain Gannington had begun to go aft, along the mould-covered maindeck, with the Second Mate; each of them holding his lamp high up, so as to cast a good light about the vessel. I turned quickly and followed them, the man with me keeping close to my heels, and plainly uneasy. As we went, I became aware that there was a feeling of moisture in the air, and I remembered the slight mist, or smoke, above the hulk, which had made Captain Gannington suggest spontaneous combustion, in explanation.

"And always, as we went, there was that vague, animal smell; and, suddenly, I found myself wishing we were well away from the old vessel.

"Abruptly, after a few paces, the Captain stopped and pointed at a row of mould-hidden shapes on either side of the maindeck . . . 'Guns,' he said. 'Been a privateer in the old days, I guess; maybe worse! We'll 'ave a look below, Doctor; there may be something worth touchin'. She's older than I thought. Mr. Selvern thinks she's about three hundred year old; but I scarce think it.'

"We continued our way aft, and I remember that I found myself walking as lightly and gingerly as possible; as if I were subconsciously afraid of treading through the rotten, mould-hid decks. I think the others had a touch of the same feeling, from the way that they walked. Occasionally, the soft mould would grip our heels, releasing them with a little, sullen suck.

"The Captain forged somewhat ahead of the Second Mate; and I know that the suggestion he had made himself, that perhaps there might be something below, worth the carrying away, had stimulated his imagination. The Second Mate was, however, beginning to feel somewhat the same way that I did; at least, I have that impression. I think, if it had not been for what I might truly describe as Captain Gannington's sturdy courage, we should all of us have just gone back over the side very soon; for there was most certainly an unwholesome feeling aboard, that made one feel queerly lacking in pluck; and you will soon perceive that this feeling was justified.

"Just as the Captain reached the few, mould-covered steps, leading up on to the short half-poop, I was suddenly aware that the feeling of moisture in the air had grown very much more definite. It was perceptible now, intermittently, as a sort of thin, moist, fog-like vapour, that came and went oddly, and seemed to make the decks a little indistinct to the view, this time and that. Once, an odd puff of it beat up suddenly from somewhere, and caught me in the face, carrying a queer, sickly, heavy

odour with it, that somehow frightened me strangely, with a suggestion of a waiting and half-comprehended danger.

"We had followed Captain Gannington up the three, mould-covered steps, and now went slowly aft along the raised after-deck.

"By the mizzen-mast, Captain Gannington paused, and held his lantern near to it. . . .

"My word, Mister,' he said to the Second Mate, 'it's fair thickened up with the mould; why, I'll g'antee it's close on four foot thick.' He shone the light down to where it met the deck. 'Good Lord!' he said, 'look at the sea-lice on it!' I stepped up; and it was as he had said; the sea-lice were thick upon it, some of them huge; not less than the size of large beetles, and all a clear, colourless shade, like water, except where there were little spots of grey in them, evidently their internal organisms.

"I've never seen the like of them, 'cept on a live cod!' said Captain Gannington, in an extremely puzzled voice. 'My word! but they're whoppers!' Then he passed on; but a few paces farther aft, he stopped again, and held his lamp near to the mould-hidden deck.

"Lord bless me, Doctor!' he called out, in a low voice, 'did ye ever see the like of that? Why, it's a foot long, if it's a hinch!'

"I stooped over his shoulder, and saw what he meant; it was a clear, colourless creature, about a foot long, and about eight inches high, with a curved back that was extraordinarily narrow. As we stared, all in a group, it gave a queer little flick, and was gone.

"Jumped!' said the Captain. "Well, if that ain't a giant of all the sea-lice that ever I've seen! I guess it's jumped twenty-foot clear.' He straightened his back, and scratched his head a moment, swinging the lantern this way and that with the other hand, and staring about us. 'Wot are *they* doin' aboard 'ere!' he said. 'You'll see 'em (little things) on fat cod, an' such-like. . . . I'm blowed, Doctor, if I understand.'

"He held his lamp towards a big mound of the mould, that occupied part of the after portion of the low poop-deck, a little foreside of where there came a two-foot high 'break' to a kind of second and loftier poop, that ran away aft to the taffrail. The mound was pretty big, several feet across, and more than a yard high. Captain Gannington walked up to it:—

"I reck'n this 's the scuttle,' he remarked, and gave it a heavy kick. The only result was a deep indentation into the huge, whitish hump of mould, as if he had driven his foot into a mass of some doughy substance. Yet, I am not altogether correct in saying that this was the only result; for a certain other thing happened— From a place made by

the Captain's foot, there came a little gush of a purplish fluid, accompanied by a peculiar smell, that was, and was not, half-familiar. Some of the mould-like substance had stuck to the toe of the Captain's boot, and from this, likewise, there issued a sweat, as it were, of the same colour.

"Well!" said Captain Gannington, in surprise; and drew back his foot to make another kick at the hump of mould; but he paused, at an exclamation from the Second Mate:—

"Don't, Sir!" said the Second Mate.

"I glanced at him, and the light from Captain Gannington's lamp showed me that his face had a bewildered, half-frightened look, as if he were suddenly and unexpectedly half-afraid of something, and as if his tongue had given away his sudden fright, without any intention on his part to speak.

"The Captain also turned and stared at him:—

"Why, Mister?" he asked, in a somewhat puzzled voice, through which there sounded just the vaguest hint of annoyance. 'We've got to shift this muck, if we're to get below.'

"I looked at the Second Mate, and it seemed to me that, curiously enough, he was listening less to the Captain, than to some other sound.

"Suddenly, he said in a queer voice:—'Listen, everybody!'

"Yet, we heard nothing, beyond the faint murmur of the men talking together in the boat alongside.

"I don't hear nothin'," said Captain Gannington, after a short pause. 'Do you, Doctor?'

"No," I said.

"Wot was it you thought you heard?" asked the Captain, turning again to the Second Mate. But the Second Mate shook his head, in a curious, almost irritable way; as if the Captain's question interrupted his listening. Captain Gannington stared a moment at him; then held his lantern up, and glanced about him, almost uneasily. I know I felt a queer sense of strain. But the light showed nothing, beyond the greyish dirty-white of the mould in all directions.

"Mister Selvern," said the Captain at last, looking at him, 'don't get fancying things. Get hold of your bloomin' self. Ye know ye heard nothin'?'

"I'm quite sure I heard something, Sir!" said the Second Mate. 'I seemed to hear——' He broke off sharply, and appeared to listen, with an almost painful intensity.

"What did it sound like?" I asked.

"'It's all right, Doctor,' said Captain Gannington, laughing gently. 'Ye can give him a tonic when we get back. I'm goin' to shift this stuff.'

"He drew back, and kicked for the second time at the ugly mass, which he took to hide the companionway. The result of his kick was startling; for the whole thing wobbled sloppily, like a mound of unhealthy-looking jelly.

"He drew his foot out of it, quickly, and took a step backward, staring, and holding his lamp towards it:—

"'By gum!' he said; and it was plain that he was genuinely startled, 'the blessed thing's gone soft!'

"The man had run back several steps from the suddenly flaccid mound, and looked horribly frightened. Though, of what, I am sure he had not the least idea. The Second Mate stood where he was, and stared. For my part, I know I had a most hideous uneasiness upon me. The Captain continued to hold his light towards the wobbling mound, and stare:—

"'It's gone squashy all through!' he said. 'There's no scuttle there. There's no bally woodwork inside that lot! Phoo! what a rum smell!'

"He walked round to the after-side of the strange mound, to see whether there might be some signs of an opening into the hull at the back of the great heap of mould-stuff. And then:—

"'LISTEN!' said the Second Mate, again, in the strangest sort of voice.

"Captain Gannington straightened himself upright, and there succeeded a pause of the most intense quietness, in which there was not even the hum of talk from the men alongside in the boat. We all heard it—a kind of dull, soft Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! somewhere in the hull under us; yet so vague that I might have been half doubtful I heard it, only that the others did so, too.

"Captain Gannington turned suddenly to where the man stood:—

"'Tell them——' he began. But the fellow cried out something, and pointed. There had come a strange intensity into his somewhat unemotional face; so that the Captain's glance followed his action instantly. I stared, also, as you may think. It was the great mound, at which the man was pointing. I saw what he meant.

"From the two gapes made in the mould-like stuff by Captain Gannington's boot, the purple fluid was jetting out in a queerly regular fashion, almost as if it were being forced out by a pump. My word! but I stared! And even as I stared, a larger jet squirted out, and splashed as far as the man, spattering his boots and trouser-legs.

"The fellow had been pretty nervous before, in a stolid, ignorant sort

of way; and his funk had been growing steadily; but, at this, he simply let out a yell, and turned about to run. He paused an instant, as if a sudden fear of the darkness that held the decks, between him and the boat, had taken him. He snatched at the Second Mate's lantern; tore it out of his hand, and plunged heavily away over the vile stretch of mould.

"Mr. Selvern, the Second Mate, said not a word; he was just standing, staring at the strange-smelling twin streams of dull purple, that were jetting out from the wobbling mound. Captain Gannington, however, roared an order to the man to come back; but the man plunged on and on across the mould, his feet seeming to be clogged by the stuff, as if it had grown suddenly soft. He zigzagged, as he ran, the lantern swaying in wild circles, as he wrenched his feet free, with a constant plop, plop; and I could hear his frightened gasps, even from where I stood.

"Come back with that lamp!" roared the Captain again; but still the man took no notice, and Captain Gannington was silent an instant, his lips working in a queer, inarticulate fashion; as if he were stunned momentarily by the very violence of his anger at the man's insubordination. And in the silence, I heard the sounds again:—Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! Quite distinctly now, beating, it seemed suddenly to me, right down under my feet, but deep.

"I stared down at the mould on which I was standing, with a quick, disgusting sense of the terrible all about me; then I looked at the Captain, and tried to say something, without appearing frightened. I saw that he had turned again to the mound, and all the anger had gone out of his face. He had his lamp out towards the mound, and was listening. There was a further moment of absolute silence; at least, I know that I was not conscious of any sound at all, in all the world, except that extraordinary Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! down somewhere in the huge bulk under us.

"The Captain shifted his feet, with a sudden, nervous movement; and as he lifted them, the mould went plop! plop! He looked quickly at me, trying to smile, as if he were not thinking anything very much about it:—'What do you make of it, Doctor?' he said.

"I think——" I began. But the Second Mate interrupted with a single word; his voice pitched a little high, in a tone that made us both stare instantly at him:—

"Look!" he said, and pointed at the mound. The thing was all of a slow quiver. A strange ripple ran outward from it, along the deck, like you will see a ripple run inshore out of a calm sea. It reached a mound a little fore-side of us, which I had supposed to be the cabin-skylight;

and in a moment, the second mound sank nearly level with the surrounding decks, quivering floppily in a most extraordinary fashion. A sudden, quick tremor took the mould, right under the Second Mate, and he gave out a hoarse little cry, and held his arms out on each side of him, to keep his balance. The tremor in the mould, spread, and Captain Gannington swayed, and spread his feet, with a sudden curse of fright. The Second Mate jumped across to him, and caught him by the wrist:—

“The boat, Sir!” he said, saying the very thing that I had lacked the pluck to say. ‘For God’s sake—’

“But he never finished; for a tremendous, hoarse scream cut off his words. They hove themselves round, and looked. I could see without turning. The man who had run from us, was standing in the waist of the ship, about a fathom from the starboard bulwarks. He was swaying from side to side, and screaming in a dreadful fashion. He appeared to be trying to lift his feet, and the light from his swaying lantern showed an almost incredible sight. All about him the mould was in active movement. His feet had sunk out of sight. The stuff appeared to be *lapping* at his legs; and abruptly his bare flesh showed. The hideous stuff had rent his trouser-legs away, as if they were paper. He gave out a simply sickening scream, and, with a vast effort, wrenched one leg free. It was partly destroyed. The next instant he pitched face downward, and the stuff heaped itself upon him, as if it were actually alive, with a dreadful savage life. It was simply infernal. The man had gone from sight. Where he had fallen was now a writhing, elongated mound, in constant and horrible increase, as the mould appeared to move towards it in strange ripples from all sides.

“Captain Gannington and the Second Mate were stone silent, in amazed and incredulous horror; but I had begun to reach towards a grotesque and terrific conclusion, both helped and hindered by my professional training.

“From the men in the boat alongside, there was a loud shouting, and I saw two of their faces appear suddenly above the rail. They showed clearly, a moment, in the light from the lamp which the man had snatched from Mr. Selvern; for, strangely enough, this lamp was standing upright and unharmed on the deck, a little way fore-side of that dreadful, elongated, growing mound, that still swayed and writhed with an incredible horror. The lamp rose and fell on the passing ripples of the mould, just—for all the world—as you will see a boat rise and fall on little swells. It is of some interest to me now, psychologically, to remember how that rising and falling lantern brought home to me,

more than anything, the incomprehensible, dreadful strangeness of it all.

"The men's faces disappeared, with sudden yells, as if they had slipped, or been suddenly hurt; and there was a fresh uproar of shouting from the boat. The men were calling to us to come away; to come away. In the same instant, I felt my left boot drawn suddenly and forcibly downward, with a horrible, painful gripe. I wrenched it free, with a yell of angry fear. Forrard of us, I saw that the vile surface was all a-move; and abruptly I found myself shouting in a queer frightened voice:—

"The boat, Captain! The boat, Captain!"

"Captain Gannington stared round at me, over his right shoulder, in a peculiar, dull way, that told me he was utterly dazed with bewilderment and the incomprehensibleness of it all. I took a quick, clogged, nervous step towards him, and gripped his arm and shook it fiercely.

"The boat!" I shouted at him. "The boat! For God's sake, tell the men to bring the boat aft!"

"Then the mould must have drawn his feet down; for, abruptly, he bellowed fiercely with terror, his momentary apathy giving place to furious energy. His thick-set, vastly muscular body doubled and writhed with his enormous effort, and he struck out madly, dropping the lantern. He tore his feet free, something ripping as he did so. The *reality* and necessity of the situation had come upon him, brutishly real, and he was roaring to the men in the boat:—

"Bring the boat aft! Bring 'er aft! Bring 'er aft!"

"The Second Mate and I were shouting the same thing, madly.

"For God's sake be smart, lads!" roared the Captain, and stooped quickly for his lamp, which still burned. His feet were gripped again, and he hove them out, blaspheming breathlessly, and leaping a yard high with his effort. Then he made a run for the side, wrenching his feet free at each step. In the same instant, the Second Mate cried out something, and grabbed at the Captain:—

"It's got hold of my feet! It's got hold of my feet!" he screamed. His feet had disappeared up to his boot-tops; and Captain Gannington caught him round the waist with his powerful left arm, gave a mighty heave, and the next instant had him free; but both his boot-soles had almost gone.

"For my part, I jumped madly from foot to foot, to avoid the plucking of the mould; and suddenly I made a run for the ship's side. But before I could get there, a queer gape came in the mould, between us and the side, at least a couple of feet wide, and how deep I don't know. It closed

up in an instant, and all the mould, where the gape had been, went into a sort of flurry of horrible rippings, so that I ran back from it; for I did not dare to put my foot upon it. Then the Captain was shouting at me:—

“‘Aft, Doctor! Aft, Doctor! This way, Doctor! Run!’ I saw then that he had passed me, and was up on the after, raised portion of the poop. He had the Second Mate thrown like a sack, all loose and quiet, over his left shoulder; for Mr. Selvern had fainted, and his long legs flogged, limp and helpless, against the Captain’s massive knees as the Captain ran. I saw, with a queer, unconscious noting of minor details, how the torn soles of the Second Mate’s boots flapped and jiggled, as the Captain staggered aft.

“‘Boat ahoy! Boat ahoy! Boat ahoy!’ shouted the Captain; and then I was beside him, shouting also. The men were answering with loud yells of encouragement, and it was plain they were working desperately to force the boat aft, through the thick scum about the ship.

“We reached the ancient, mould-hid taffrail, and slewed about, breathlessly, in the half-darkness, to see what was happening. Captain Gannington had left his lantern by the big mound, when he picked up the Second Mate; and as we stood, gasping, we discovered suddenly that all the mould between us and the light was full of movement. Yet, the part on which we stood, for about six or eight feet forrard of us, was still firm.

“Every couple of seconds, we shouted to the men to hasten, and they kept on calling to us that they would be with us in an instant. And all the time, we watched the deck of that dreadful hulk, feeling, for my part, literally sick with mad suspense, and ready to jump overboard into that filthy scum all about us.

“Down somewhere in the hugh bulk of the ship, there was all the time that extraordinary, dull, ponderous Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! growing ever louder. I seemed to feel the whole hull of the derelict beginning to quiver and thrill with each dull beat. And to me, with the grotesque and monstrous suspicion of what made that noise, it was, at once, the most dreadful and incredible sound I have ever heard.

“As we waited desperately for the boat, I scanned incessantly so much of the grey-white bulk as the lamp showed. The whole of the decks seemed to be in strange movement. Forrard of the lamp, I could see, indistinctly, the moundings of the mould swaying and nodding hideously, beyond the circle of the brightest rays. Nearer, and full in the glow of the lamp, the mound which should have indicated the skylight,

was swelling steadily. There were ugly, purple veinings on it, and as it swelled, it seemed to me that the veinings and mottlings on it, were becoming plainer—rising, as though embossed upon it, like you will see the veins stand out on the body of a powerful, full-blooded horse. It was most extraordinary. The mound that we had supposed to cover the companion-way, had sunk flat with the surrounding mould, and I could not see that it jetted out any more of the purplish fluid.

"A quaking movement of the mould began, away forrard of the lamp, and came flurrying away aft towards us; and at the sight of that, I climbed up on to the spongy-feeling taffrail, and yelled afresh for the boat. The men answered with a shout, which told me they were nearer; but the beastly scum was so thick that it was evidently a fight to move the boat at all. Beside me, Captain Gannington was shaking the Second Mate furiously, and the man stirred and began to moan. The Captain shook him again.

"Wake up! Wake up, Mister!' he shouted.

"The Second Mate staggered out of the Captain's arms, and collapsed suddenly, shrieking:—'My feet! Oh, God! My feet!' The Captain and I lugged him up off the mould, and got him into a sitting position upon the taffrail, where he kept up a continual moaning.

"Hold 'im, Doctor,' said the Captain, and whilst I did so, he ran forrard a few yards, and peered down over the starboard quarter rail. 'For God's sake, be smart, lads! Be smart! Be smart!' he shouted down to the men; and they answered him, breathless, from close at hand; yet still too far away for the boat to be any use to us on the instant.

"I was holding the moaning, half-unconscious officer, and staring forrard along the poop decks. The flurrying of the mould was coming aft, slowly and noiselessly. And then, suddenly, I saw something closer:—

"Look out, Captain!' I shouted; and even as I shouted, the mould near to him gave a sudden peculiar slobber. I had seen a ripple stealing towards him through the horrible stuff. He gave an enormous, clumsy leap, and landed near to us on the sound part of the mould; but the movement followed him. He turned and faced it, swearing fiercely. All about his feet there came abruptly little gapings, which made horrid sucking noises.

"Come back, Captain!' I yelled. 'Come back, quick!'

"As I shouted, a ripple came at his feet—lipping at them; and he stamped insanely at it, and leaped back, his boot torn half off his foot. He swore madly with pain and anger, and jumped swiftly for the taffrail.

"Come on, Doctor! Over we go!" he called. Then he remembered the filthy scum, and hesitated; roaring out desperately to the men to hurry. I stared down, also.

"The Second Mate?" I said.

"I'll take charge, Doctor," said Captain Gannington, and caught hold of Mr. Selvern. As he spoke, I thought I saw something beneath us, outlined against the scum. I leaned out over the stern, and peered. There was something under the port quarter.

"There's something down there, Captain!" I called, and pointed in the darkness.

"He stooped far over, and stared.

"A boat, by gum! A BOAT!" he yelled, and began to wriggle swiftly along the taffrail, dragging the Second Mate after him. I followed.

"A boat it is, sure!" he exclaimed, a few moments later; and, picking up the Second Mate clear of the rail, he hove him down into the boat, where he fell with a crash into the bottom.

"Over ye go, Doctor!" he yelled at me, and pulled me bodily off the rail, and dropped me after the officer. As he did so, I felt the whole of the ancient, spongy rail give a peculiar, sickening quiver, and begin to wobble. I fell on to the Second Mate, and the Captain came after, almost in the same instant; but fortunately, he landed clear of us, on to the fore thwart, which broke under his weight, with a loud crack and splintering of wood.

"Thank God!" I heard him mutter. "Thank God! . . . I guess that was a mighty near thing to goin' to hell."

"He struck a match, just as I got to my feet, and between us we got the Second Mate straightened out on one of the after thwarts. We shouted to the men in the boat, telling them where we were, and saw the light of their lantern shining round the starboard counter of the derelict. They called back to us, to tell us they were doing their best; and then, whilst we waited, Captain Gannington struck another match, and began to overhaul the boat we had dropped into. She was a modern, two-bowed boat, and on the stern, there was painted 'CYCLONE Glasgow.' She was in pretty fair condition, and had evidently drifted into the scum and been held by it.

"Captain Gannington struck several matches, and went forrard towards the derelict. Suddenly, he called to me, and I jumped over the thwarts to him.

"Look, Doctor," he said; and I saw what he meant—a mass of bones, up in the bows of the boat. I stooped over them, and looked. There were

the bones of at least three people, all mixed together, in an extraordinary fashion, and quite clean and dry. I had a sudden thought concerning the bones; but I said nothing; for my thought was vague, in some ways, and concerned the grotesque and incredible suggestion that had come to me, as to the cause of that ponderous, dull Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! that beat on so infernally within the hull, and was plain to hear even now that we had got off the vessel herself. And all the while, you know, I had a sick, horrible, mental-picture of that frightful wriggling mound aboard the hulk.

"As Captain Gannington struck a final match, I saw something that sickened me, and the Captain saw it in the same instant. The match went out, and he fumbled clumsily for another, and struck it. We saw the thing again. We had not been mistaken. . . . A great lip of grey-white was protruding in over the edge of the boat—a great lappet of the mould was coming stealthily towards us; a live mass of *the very hull itself*. And suddenly Captain Gannington yelled out, in so many words, the grotesque and incredible thing I was thinking:—

"'SHE'S ALIVE!'

"I never heard such a sound of *comprehension* and terror in a man's voice. The very horrified assurance of it made actual to me the thing that, before, had only lurked in my subconscious mind. I knew he was right; I knew that the explanation, my reason and my training, both repelled and reached towards, was the true one. . . . I wonder whether anyone can possibly understand our feelings in that moment. . . . The unmitigable horror of it, and the *incredibleness*.

"As the light of the match burned up fully, I saw that the mass of living matter, coming towards us, was streaked and veined with purple, the veins standing out, enormously distended. The whole thing quivered continuously to each ponderous Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! of that gargantuan organ that pulsed within the huge grey-white bulk. The flame of the match reached the Captain's fingers, and there came to me a little sickly whiff of burned flesh; but he seemed unconscious of any pain. Then the flame went out, in a brief sizzle; yet at the last moment, I had seen an extraordinary raw look, become visible upon the end of that monstrous, protruding lappet. It had become dewed with a hideous, purplish sweat. And with the darkness, there came a sudden charnel-like stench.

"I heard the match-box split in Captain Gannington's hands, as he wrenched it open. Then he swore, in a queer frightened voice; for he had come to the end of his matches. He turned clumsily in the darkness,

and tumbled over the nearest thwart, in his eagerness to get to the stern of the boat; and I after him; for we knew that thing was coming towards us through the darkness; reaching over that piteous mingled heap of human bones, all jumbled together in the bows. We shouted madly to the men, and for answer saw the bows of the boat emerge dimly into view, round the starboard counter of the derelict.

"Thank God! I gasped out; but Captain Gannington yelled to them to show a light. Yet this they could not do; for the lamp had just been stepped on, in their desperate efforts to force the boat round to us.

"Quick! Quick! I shouted.

"For God's sake be smart, men!" roared the Captain; and both of us faced the darkness under the port counter, out of which we knew (but could not see) the thing was coming towards us.

"An oar! Smart now; pass me an oar!" shouted the Captain; and reached out his hands through the gloom towards the oncoming boat. I saw a figure stand up in the bows, and hold something out to us, across the intervening yards of scum. Captain Gannington swept his hands through the darkness, and encountered it.

"I've got it. Let go there!" he said, in a quick, tense voice.

"In the same instant, the boat we were in, was pressed over suddenly to starboard by some tremendous weight. Then I heard the Captain shout:—'Duck y'r head, Doctor'; and directly afterwards he swung the heavy, fourteen-foot ash oar round his head, and struck into the darkness. There came a sudden squelch, and he struck again, with a savage grunt of fierce energy. At the second blow, the boat righted, with a slow movement, and directly afterwards the other boat bumped gently into ours.

"Captain Gannington dropped the oar, and springing across to the Second Mate, hove him up off the thwart, and pitched him with knee and arms clear in over the bows among the men; then he shouted to me to follow, which I did, and he came after me, bringing the oar with him. We carried the Second Mate aft, and the Captain shouted to the men to back the boat a little; then they got her bows clear of the boat we had just left, and so headed out through the scum for the open sea.

"Where's Tom 'Arrison?" gasped one of the men, in the midst of his exertions. He happened to be Tom Harrison's particular chum; and Captain Gannington answered him briefly enough:—

"Dead! Pull! don't talk!"

"Now, difficult as it had been to force the boat through the scum to our rescue, the difficulty to get clear seemed tenfold. After some five

minutes pulling, the boat seemed hardly to have moved a fathom, if so much; and a quite dreadful fear took me afresh; which one of the panting men put suddenly into words:—

“‘It’s got us!’ he gasped out; ‘same as poor Tom!’ It was the man who had inquired where Harrison was.

“‘Shut y’r mouth an’ *pull!*’ roared the Captain. And so another few minutes passed. Abruptly, it seemed to me that the dull, ponderous Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! came more plainly through the dark, and I stared intently over the stern. I sickened a little; for I could almost swear that the dark mass of the monster was actually *nearer* . . . that it was coming nearer to us through the darkness. Captain Gannington must have had the same thought; for after a brief look into the darkness, he made one jump to the stroke-oar, and began to double-bank it.

“‘Get forrid under the thwarts, Doctor!’ he said to me, rather breathlessly. ‘Get in the bows, an’ see if you can’t free the stuff a bit round the bows.’

“I did as he told me, and a minute later I was in the bows of the boat, puddling the scum from side to side with the boat-hook, and trying to break up the viscid, clinging muck. A heavy, almost animal-like odour rose off it, and all the air seemed full of the deadening smell. I shall never find words to tell any one the whole horror of it all—the threat that seemed to hang in the very air around us; and, but a little astern, that incredible thing, coming, as I firmly believe, nearer, and the scum holding us like half melted glue.

“The minutes passed in a deadly, eternal fashion, and I kept staring back astern into the darkness; but never ceasing to puddle that filthy scum, striking at it and switching it from side to side, until I sweated.

“Abruptly, Captain Gannington sang out:—

“‘We’re gaining, lads. Pull!’ And I felt the boat forge ahead perceptibly, as they gave way, with renewed hope and energy. There was soon no doubt of it; for presently that hideous Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! had grown quite dim and vague somewhere astern, and I could no longer see the derelict; for the night had come down tremendously dark, and all the sky was thick overset with heavy clouds. As we drew nearer and nearer to the edge of the scum, the boat moved more and more freely, until suddenly we emerged with a clean, sweet, fresh sound, into the open sea.

“‘Thank God!’ I said aloud, and drew in the boat-hook, and made my way aft again to where Captain Gannington now sat once more at the tiller. I saw him looking anxiously up at the sky, and across to where

the lights of our vessel burned, and again he would seem to listen intently; so that I found myself listening also.

"What's that, Captain?" I said sharply; for it seemed to me that I heard a sound far astern, something between a queer whine and a low whistling. 'What's that?'

"It's wind, Doctor," he said, in a low voice: 'I wish to God we were aboard.'

"Then, to the men:—'Pull! Put y'r backs into it, or ye'll never put y'r teeth through good bread again!'

"The men obeyed nobly, and we reached the vessel safely, and had the boat safely stowed, before the storm came, which it did in a furious white smother out of the West. I could see it for some minutes beforehand, tearing the sea, in the gloom, into a wall of phosphorescent foam; and as it came nearer, that peculiar whining, piping sound, grew louder and louder, until it was like a vast steam whistle, rushing towards us across the sea.

"And when it did come, we got it very heavy indeed; so that the morning showed us nothing but a welter of white seas; and that grim derelict was many a score of miles away in the smother, lost as utterly as our hearts could wish to lose her.

"When I came to examine the Second Mate's feet, I found them in a very extraordinary condition. The soles of them had the appearance of having been partly digested. I know of no other word that so exactly describes their condition; and the agony the man suffered, must have been dreadful.

"Now," concluded the Doctor, "that is what I call a case in point. If we could know exactly what that old vessel had originally been loaded with, and the juxtaposition of the various articles of her cargo, plus the heat and time she had endured, plus one or two other only guessable quantities, we should have solved the chemistry of the Life-Force, gentlemen. Not necessarily the *origin*, mind you; but, at least, we should have taken a big step on the way. I've often regretted that gale, you know—in a way, that is, in a way! It was a most amazing discovery; but, at the time, I had nothing but thankfulness to be rid of it. . . . A most amazing chance. I often think of the way the monster woke out of its torpor. . . . And that scum. . . . The dead pigs caught in it. . . . I fancy that was a grim kind of net, gentlemen. . . . It caught many things. . . . It . . ."

The old Doctor sighed and nodded.

"If I could have had her bill of lading," he said, his eyes full of regret.

"If—— It might have told me something to help. But, anyway. . . ." He began to fill his pipe again. . . . "I suppose," he ended, looking round at us gravely, "I s'pose we humans are an ungrateful lot of beggars, at the best! . . . But . . . but what a chance! What a chance—eh?"

Ray Bradbury can always be depended on to put a new and exciting twist to whatever he turns his mind to. Those diabolical but true-to-life children that infest his tales carry off Bradbury's ideas with a screaming gusto that brings conviction to readers of all ages and dispositions. Now take this alarming tale of eleven-year-old Douglas, stuffed chicken, and the eccentric boarder upstairs. You may suspect something of what is coming, but when you finish the tale we think you will just sit back and gasp.

The Man Upstairs

by Ray Bradbury



HE REMEMBERED how carefully and expertly Grandmother would fondle the cold cut guts of the chicken and withdraw the marvels therein; the wet shining loops of meat-smelling intestine, the muscled lump of heart, the gizzard with the collection of seeds in it. How neatly and nicely Grandma would slit the chicken and push her fat little hand in to deprive it of its medals. These would be segregated, some in pans of water, others in paper to be thrown to the dog later, perhaps. And then the ritual of taxidermy, stuffing the bird with watered, seasoned bread, and performing surgery with a swift, bright needle, stitch after pulled tight stitch.

This was one of the prime thrills of Douglas's eleven-year-old life span.

Altogether, he counted twenty knives in the various squeaking drawers of the magic kitchen table from which Grandmama, a kindly, gentle-faced, white-haired old witch, drew paraphernalia for her miracles.

Douglas was to be quiet. He could stand across the table from Grandmama, his freckled nose tucked over the edge, watching, but any loose boy-talk might interfere with the spell. It was a wonder when Grandma

brandished silver shakers over the bird, supposedly sprinkling showers of mummy-dust and pulverized Indian bones, muttering mystical verses under her toothless breath.

"Grammy," said Douglas at last, breaking the silence, "Am I like that inside?" He pointed at the chicken.

"Yes," said Grandma. "A little more orderly and presentable, but just about the same. . . ."

"And more of it!" added Douglas, proud of his guts.

"Yes," said Grandma. "More of it."

"Grandpa has lots more'n me. His sticks out in front so he can rest his elbows on it, Grammy."

Grandma laughed and shook her head.

Douglas said, "And Lucie Williams, down the street, she . . ."

"Hush, child!" cried Grandma.

"But she's got . . ."

"Never you mind what she's got! That's different."

"But why is *she* different?"

"A darning-needle dragon-fly is coming by some day and sew up your mouth," said Grandma firmly.

Douglas waited, then asked, "How do you know I've got insides like that, Grandma?"

"Oh, go 'way, now!"

The front door-bell rang.

Through the front door glass as he ran down the hall, Douglas saw a straw hat. The bell jangled again and again. Douglas opened the door.

"Good morning, child, is the landlady at home?"

Cold gray eyes in a long, smooth, walnut-colored face gazed upon Douglas. The man was tall, thin, and carried a suitcase, a briefcase, an umbrella under one bent arm, gloves rich and thick and gray on his thin fingers, and wore a horribly new straw hat.

Douglas backed up. "She's busy."

"I wish to rent her upstairs room, as advertised."

"We've got ten boarders, and it's all ready rented; go away!"

"Douglas!" Grandma was behind him suddenly. "How do you do?" she said to the stranger. "Never mind this child."

Unsmiling, the man stepped stiffly in. Douglas watched them ascend out of sight up the stairs, heard Grandma detailing the conveniences of the upstairs room. Soon she hurried down to pile linens from the linen closet on Douglas and send him scooting up with them.

Douglas paused at the room's threshold. The room was changed

oddly, simply because the stranger had been in it a moment. The straw hat lay brittle and terrible upon the bed, the umbrella leaned stiff against one wall like a dead bat with dark moist wings folded.

Douglas blinked at the umbrella.

The stranger stood in the center of the changed room, tall, tall.

"Here!" Douglas littered the bed with supplies. "We eat at noon sharp, and if you're late coming down, the soup'll get cold. Grandma fixes it so it will, every time!"

The tall strange man counted out ten new copper pennies and tinkled them in Douglas's blouse pocket. "We shall be friends," he said, grimly.

It was funny, the man having nothing but pennies. Lots of them. No silver at all, no dimes, no quarters. Just new copper pennies.

Douglas thanked him glumly. "I'll drop these in my dime bank when I get them changed into a dime. I got six dollars and fifty cents in dimes all ready for my camp trip in August."

"I must wash now," said the tall strange man.

Once, at midnight, Douglas had wakened to hear a storm rumbling outside—the cold hard wind shaking the house, the rain driving against the window. And then a lightning bolt had landed outside the window with a silent, terrific concussion. He remembered that fear of looking about at his room, seeing it strange and awful in the instantaneous light.

So it was, now, in this room. He stood looking up at the stranger. This room was no longer the same, but changed indefinitely because this man, quick as a lightning bolt, had shed his light about it. Douglas backed up slowly as the stranger advanced.

The door closed in his face.

The wooden fork went up with mashed potatoes, came down empty. Mr. Koberman, for that was his name, had brought the wooden fork and wooden knife and spoon with him when Grandma called lunch.

"Mrs. Spaulding," he had said, quietly, "my own cutlery; please use it. I will have lunch today, but from tomorrow on, only breakfast and supper."

Grandma bustled in and out, bearing steaming tureens of soup and beans and mashed potatoes to impress her new boarder, while Douglas sat rattling his silverware on his plate, because he had discovered it irritated Mr. Koberman.

"I know a trick," said Douglas. "Watch." He picked a fork-tine with his fingernail. He pointed at various sectors of the table, like a magician. Wherever he pointed, the sound of the vibrating fork-tine emerged, like

a metal elfin voice. Simply done, of course. He pressed the fork handle on the table-top, secretly. The vibration came from the wood like a sounding board. It looked quite magical. "There, there, and *there!*" exclaimed Douglas, happily plucking the fork again. He pointed at Mr. Koberman's soup and the noise came from it.

Mr. Koberman's walnut-colored face became hard and firm and awful. He pushed the soup bowl away violently, his lips twisting. He fell back in his chair.

Grandma appeared. "Why, what's wrong, Mr. Koberman?"

"I cannot eat this soup."

"Why?"

"Because I am full and can eat no more. Thank you."

Mr. Koberman left the room, glaring.

"What did you do, just then?" asked Grandma at Douglas, sharply.

"Nothing. Grammy, why does he eat with *wooden* spoons?"

"Yours not to question! When do you go back to school, anyway?"

"Seven weeks."

"Oh, my land!" said Grandma.

Mr. Koberman worked nights. Each morning at eight he arrived mysteriously home, devoured a very small breakfast, and then slept soundlessly in his room all through the dreaming hot daytime, until the huge supper with all the other boarders at night.

Mr. Koberman's sleeping habits made it necessary for Douglas to be quiet. This was unbearable. So, whenever Grandma visited down the street, Douglas stomped up and down stairs beating a drum, bouncing golf balls, or just screaming for three minutes outside Mr. Koberman's door, or flushing the toilet seven times in succession.

Mr. Koberman never moved. His room was silent, dark. He did not complain. There was no sound. He slept on and on. It was very strange.

Douglas felt a pure white flame of hatred burn inside himself with a steady, unflickering beauty. Now that room was Koberman Land. Once it had been flowery bright when Miss Sadlowe lived there. Now it was stark, bare, cold, clean, everything in its place, alien and brittle.

Douglas climbed upstairs on the fourth morning.

Halfway to the second floor was a large sun-filled window, framed by six inch panes of orange, purple, blue, red and burgundy glass. In the enchanted early mornings when the sun fell through to strike the landing and slide down the stair banister, Douglas stood entranced at this window peering at the world through the multicolored windows.

Now a blue world, a blue sky, blue people, blue streetcars and blue trotting dogs.

He shifted panes. Now—an amber world! Two lemonish women glided by, resembling the daughters of Fu Manchul! Douglas giggled. This pane made even the sunlight more purely golden.

It was eight o'clock. Mr. Koberman strolled by below, on the sidewalk, returning from his night's work, his cane looped over his elbow, straw hat glued to his head with patent oil.

Douglas shifted panes again. Mr. Koberman was a red man walking through a red world with red trees and red flowers and—something else. Something about—Mr. Koberman.

Douglas squinted.

The red glass *did* things to Mr. Koberman. His face, his suit, his hands. The clothes seemed to melt away. Douglas almost believed, for one terrible instant, that he could see *inside* Mr. Koberman. And what he saw made him lean wildly against the small red pane, blinking.

Mr. Koberman glanced up just then, saw Douglas, and raised his cane-umbrella angrily, as if to strike. He ran swiftly across the red lawn to the front door.

"Young man!" he cried, running up the stairs. "What were you doing?"

"Just looking," said Douglas, numbly.

"That's all, is it?" cried Mr. Koberman.

"Yes, sir. I look through all the glasses. All kinds of worlds. Blue ones, red ones, yellow ones. All different."

"All kinds of worlds, is it!" Mr. Koberman glanced at the little panes of glass, his face all pale. He got hold of himself. He wiped his face with a handkerchief and pretended to laugh. "Yes. All kinds of worlds. All different." He walked to the door of his room. "Go right ahead; play," he said.

The door closed. The hall was empty. Mr. Koberman had gone in.

Douglas shrugged and found a new pane.

"Oh, everything's violet!"

Half an hour later, while playing in his sandbox behind the house, Douglas heard the crash and the shattering tinkle. He leaped up.

A moment later, Grandma appeared on the back porch, the old razor stop trembling in her hand.

"Douglas! I told you time and again never fling your basketball against the house! Oh, I could just cry!"

"I been sitting right here," he protested.

"Come see what you've done, you nasty boy!"

The great colored window panes lay shattered in a rainbow chaos on the upstairs landing. His basketball lay in the ruins.

Before he could even begin telling his innocence, Douglas was struck a dozen stinging blows upon his rump. Wherever he landed, screaming, the razor strop struck again.

Later, hiding his mind in the sandpile like an ostrich, Douglas nursed his dreadful pains. He knew who'd thrown that basketball. A man with a straw hat and a stiff umbrella and a cold, gray room. Yeah, yeah, yeah. He dribbled tears. Just wait. Just *wait*.

He heard Grandma sweeping up the broken glass. She brought it out and threw it in the trash bin. Blue, pink, yellow meteors of glass dropped brightly down.

When she was gone, Douglas dragged himself, whimpering, over to save out three pieces of the incredible glass. Mr. Koberman disliked the colored windows. These—he clinked them in his fingers—would be worth saving.

Grandfather arrived from his newspaper office each night, shortly ahead of the other boarders, at five o'clock. When a slow, heavy tread filled the hall, and a thick mahogany cane thumped in the cane-rack, Douglas ran to embrace the large stomach and sit on Grandpa's knee while he read the evening paper.

"Hi, Grampa!"

"Hello, down there!"

"Grandma cut chickens again today. It's fun watching," said Douglas.

Grandpa kept reading. "That's twice this week, chickens. She's the chickenist woman. You like to watch her cut 'em, eh? Cold-blooded little pepper! Ha!"

"I'm just curious."

"You are," rumbled Grandpa, scowling. "Remember that day when that young lady was killed at the rail station. You just walked over and looked at her, blood and all." He laughed. "Queer duck. Stay that way. Fear nothing, ever in your life. I guess you get it from your father, him being a military man and all, and you so close to him before you came here to live last year." Grandpa returned to his paper.

A long pause. "Gramps?"

"Yes?"

"What if a man didn't have a heart or lungs or stomach but still walked around, alive?"

"That," rumbled Gramps, "would be a miracle."

"I don't mean a—a miracle. I mean, what if he was all *different* inside. Not like me."

"Well, he wouldn't be quite human then, would he, boy?"

"Guess not, Gramps. Gramps, you got a heart and lungs?"

Gramps chuckled. "Well, tell the truth, I don't *know*. Never seen them. Never had an X-ray, never been to a doctor. Might as well be potato-solid for all I know."

"Have I got a stomach?"

"You certainly have!" cried Grandma from the parlor entry. "'Cause I feed it! And you've lungs, you scream loud enough to wake the crumbles. And you've dirty hands, go wash them! Dinner's ready. Grandpa, come on. Douglas, git!"

In the rush of boarders streaming downstairs, Grandpa, if he intended questioning Douglas further about the weird conversation, lost his opportunity. If dinner delayed an instant more, Grandma and the potatoes would develop simultaneous lumps.

The boarders, laughing and talking at the table—Mr. Koberman silent and sullen among them—were silenced when Grandfather cleared his throat. He talked politics a few minutes and then shifted over into the intriguing topic of the recent peculiar deaths in the town.

"It's enough to make an old newspaper editor prick up his ears," he said, eyeing them all. "That young Miss Larsson, lived across the ravine, now. Found her dead three days ago for no reason, just funny kinds of tattoos all over her, and a facial expression that would make Dante cringe. And that other young lady, what was her name? Whitely? She disappeared and *never did* come back."

"Them things happen alla time," said Mr. Britz, the garage mechanic, chewing. "Ever peek inna Missing Peoples Bureau file? It's *that* long." He illustrated. "Can't tell *what* happens to most of 'em."

"Anyone want more dressing?" Grandma ladled liberal portions from the chicken's interior. Douglas watched, thinking about how that chicken had had two kinds of guts—God-made and Man-made.

Well, how about *three* kinds of guts?

Eh?

Why not?

Conversation continued about the mysterious death of so-and-so, and,

oh, yes, remember a week ago, Marion Barsumian died of heart failure, but maybe that didn't connect up? or did it? you're crazy! forget it, why talk about it at the dinner table? So:

"Never can tell," said Mr. Britz. "Maybe we got a vampire in town."

Mr. Koberman stopped eating.

"In the year 1927?" said Grandma. "A vampire? Oh, go on, now."

"Sure," said Mr. Britz. "Kill 'em with silver bullets. Anything silver for that matter. Vampires *hate* silver. I read it in a book somewhere, once. Sure, I did."

Douglas looked at Mr. Koberman who ate with wooden knives and forks and carried only new copper pennies in his pocket.

"It's poor judgment," said Grandpa, "to call anything by a name. We don't know what a hobgoblin or a vampire or a troll is. Could be lots of things. You can't heave them into categories with labels and say they'll act one way or another. That'd be silly. They're people. People who do things. Yes, that's the way to put it: people who *do* things."

"Excuse me," said Mr. Koberman, who got up and went out for his evening walk to work.

The stars, the moon, the wind, the clock ticking, and the chiming of the hours into dawn, the sun rising, and here it was another morning, another day, and Mr. Koberman coming along the sidewalk from his night's work. Douglas stood off like a small mechanism whirring and watching with carefully microscopic eyes.

At noon, Grandma went to the store to buy groceries.

As was his custom every day when Grandma was gone, Douglas yelled outside Mr. Koberman's door for a full three minutes. As usual, there was no response. The silence was horrible.

He ran downstairs, got the pass-key, a silver fork, and the three pieces of colored glass he had saved from the shattered window. He fitted the key to the lock and swung the door slowly open.

The room was in half light, the shades drawn. Mr. Koberman lay atop his bedcovers, in slumber clothes, breathing gently, up and down. He didn't move. His face was motionless.

"Hello, Mr. Koberman!"

The colorless walls echoed the man's regular breathing.

"Mr. Koberman, hello!"

Bouncing a golf ball, Douglas advanced. He yelled. Still no answer.

"Mr. Koberman!"

Bending over Mr. Koberman, Douglas picked the tines of the silver fork in the sleeping man's face.

Mr. Koberman winced. He twisted. He groaned bitterly.

Response. Good. Swell.

Douglas drew a piece of blue glass from his pocket. Looking through the blue glass fragment he found himself in a blue room, in a blue world different from the world he knew. As different as was the red world. Blue furniture, blue bed, blue ceiling and walls, blue wooden eating utensils atop the blue bureau, and the sullen dark blue of Mr. Koberman's face and arms and his blue chest rising, falling. Also. . .

Mr. Koberman's eyes were wide, staring at him with a hungry darkness.

Douglas fell back, pulled the blue glass from his eyes.

Mr. Koberman's eyes were shut.

Blue glass again—open. Blue glass away—shut. Blue glass again—open. Away—shut. Funny. Douglas experimented, trembling. Through the glass the eyes seemed to peer hungrily, avidly through Mr. Koberman's closed lids. Without the blue glass they seemed tightly shut.

But it was the rest of Mr. Koberman's body. . . .

Mr. Koberman's bedclothes dissolved off him. The blue glass had something to do with it. Or perhaps it was the clothes themselves, just being *on* Mr. Koberman. Douglas cried out.

He was looking through the wall of Mr. Koberman's stomach, right *inside* him!

Mr. Koberman was solid.

Or, nearly so, anyway.

There were strange shapes and sizes within him.

Douglas must have stood amazed for five minutes, thinking about the blue worlds, the red worlds, the yellow worlds side by side, living together like glass panes around the big white stair window. Side by side, the colored panes, the different worlds; Mr. Koberman had said so himself.

So this was why the colored windows had been broken.

"Mr. Koberman, wake up!"

No answer.

"Mr. Koberman, where do you work at night? Mr. Koberman, where do you work?"

A little breeze stirred the blue window shade.

"In a red world or a green world or a yellow one, Mr. Koberman?"

Over everything was a blue glass silence.

"Wait there," said Douglas.

He walked down to the kitchen, pulled open the great squeaking drawers and picked out the sharpest, biggest knife.

Very calmly he walked into the hall, climbed back up the stairs again, opened the door to Mr. Koberman's room, went in, and closed it, holding the sharp knife in one hand.

Grandma was busy fingering a piecrust into a pan when Douglas entered the kitchen to place something on the table.

"Grandma, what's this?"

She glanced up briefly, over her glasses. "I don't know."

It was square, like a box, and elastic. It was bright orange in color. It had four square tubes, colored blue, attached to it. It smelled funny.

"Ever see anything like it, Grandma?"

"No."

"That's what I thought."

Douglas left it there, went from the kitchen. Five minutes later he returned with something else. "How about *this*?"

He laid down a bright pink linked chain with a purple triangle at one end.

"Don't bother me," said Grandma. "It's only a chain."

Next time he returned with two hands full. A ring, a square, a triangle, a pyramid, a rectangle, and—other shapes. All of them were pliable, resilient, and looked as if they were made of gelatin. "This isn't all," said Douglas, putting them down. "There's more where this came from."

Grandma said; "Yes, yes," in a far-off tone, very busy.

"You were wrong, Grandma."

"About what?"

"About all people being the same inside."

"Stop talking nonsense."

"Where's my piggy-bank?"

"On the mantel, where you left it."

"Thanks."

He tromped into the parlor, reached up for his piggy-bank.

Grandpa came home from the office at five.

"Grandpa, come upstairs."

"Sure, son. Why?"

"Something to show you. It's not nice; but it's interesting."

Grandpa chuckled, following his grandson's feet up to Mr. Koberman's room.

"Grandma mustn't know about this; she wouldn't like it," said Douglas. He pushed the door wide open. "There."

Grandfather gasped.

Douglas remembered the next few hours all the rest of his life. Standing over Mr. Koberman's naked body, the coroner and his assistants. Grandma, downstairs, asking somebody, "What's going on up there?" and Grandpa saying, shakily, "I'll take Douglas away on a long vacation so he can forget this whole ghastly affair. Ghastly, ghastly affair!"

Douglas said, "Why should it be bad? I don't see anything bad. I don't feel bad."

The coroner shivered and said, "Koberman's dead, all right."

His assistant sweated. "Did you see those *things* in the pans of water and in the wrapping paper?"

"Oh, my God, my God, yes, I saw them."

"Christ."

The coroner bent over Mr. Koberman's body again. "This better be kept secret, boys. It wasn't murder. It was a mercy the boy acted. God knows what may have happened if he hadn't."

"What was Koberman? A vampire? A monster?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Something—not human." The coroner moved his hands deftly over the suture.

Douglas was proud of his work. He'd gone to much trouble. He had watched Grandmother carefully and remembered. Needle and thread and all. All in all, Mr. Koberman was as neat a job as any chicken ever popped into hell by Grandma.

"I heard the boy say that Koberman lived even after all those *things* were taken out of him." The coroner looked at the triangles and chains and pyramids floating in the pans of water. "Keep on *living*. God."

"Did the boy say that?"

"He did."

"Then, what *did* kill Koberman?"

The coroner drew a few strands of sewing thread from their bedding.

"This. . . ." he said.

Sunlight blinked coldly off a half-revealed treasure trove; six dollars and seventy cents' worth of silver dimes inside Mr. Koberman's chest.

"I think Douglas made a wise investment," said the coroner, sewing the flesh back up over the "dressing" quickly.

Have you ever gazed into the glowing flecked stream of the Milky Way and let your mind rove on the countless suns and planets that must be represented there? And then cast further on the infinity of histories, legends, and romances that must be hidden on each invisible world, recorded but yet unreadable to us, now and perhaps forever? Clark Ashton Smith employs his poetic talents to pry free one secret history from the otherwise impenetrable pages of that cosmic library.

The Planet of the Dead

by Clark Ashton Smith

B

I

Y PROFESSION, Francis Melchior was a dealer in antiques; by avocation, he was an astronomer. Thus he contrived to placate, if not to satisfy, two needs of a somewhat complex and unusual temperament. Through his occupation, he gratified in a measure his craving for all things that have been steeped in the mortuary shadows of dead ages, in the dusky amber flames of long-sunken suns; all things that have about them the irresoluble mystery of departed time. And through his avocation, he found a ready path to exotic realms in further space, to the only spheres where his fancy could dwell in freedom and his dreams could know contentment. For Melchior was one of those who are born with an immedicable distaste for all that is present or near at hand; one of those who have drunk too lightly of oblivion and have not wholly forgotten the transcendent glories of other eons, and the worlds from which they were exiled into human birth; so that their furtive, restless thoughts and dim, unquenchable longings return obscurely toward the vanishing shores of a lost heritage. The earth is too narrow for such, and the compass of mortal time is too brief; and paucity and barrenness are everywhere; and in all places their lot is a never-ending weariness.

With a predisposition ordinarily so fatal to the acquisitive faculties, it was indeed remarkable that Melchior should have prospered at all in his business. His love of ancient things, of rare vases, paintings, furniture, jewels, idols and statues, made him readier to buy than to sell; and his sales were too often a source of secret heartache and regret. But somehow, in spite of all this, he had managed to attain a degree of financial comfort. By nature, he was something of a solitary, and was generally looked upon as eccentric. He had never cared to marry; he had made no intimate friends; and he lacked many of the interests, which, in the eyes of the average person, are supposed to characterize a normal human being.

Melchior's passion for antiquities and his devotion to the stars, both dated from his childhood days. Now, in his thirty-first year, with increasing leisure and prosperity, he had turned an upper balcony of his suburban hilltop house into an amateur observatory. Here, with a new and powerful telescope, he studied the summer heavens night after night. He possessed little talent and less inclination for those recondite mathematical calculations which form so large a part of orthodox astronomy; but he had an intuitional grasp of the heavenly immensitudes, a mystic sensitivity toward all that is far off in space. His imagination roamed and adventured among the suns and nebulae; and for him, each tiny gleam of telescopic light appeared to tell its own story and invite him toward its own unique realm of ultramundane fantasy. He was not greatly concerned with the names which astronomers have given to particular stars and constellations; but nevertheless, each of them possessed for him a separate individuality not to be mistaken for that of any other.

In especial, Melchior was drawn by one minute star in a wide-flung constellation south of the Milky Way. It was barely discernible to the naked eye; and even through his telescope, it gave an impression of cosmic solitude and remoteness such as he had never felt in any other orb. It allured him more than the moon-surrounded planets or the first-magnitude stars with their flaming spectra; and he returned to it again and again, forsaking for its lonely point of light the marvelous manifold rings of Saturn and the cloudy zone of Venus and the intricate coils of the great nebula of Andromeda.

Musing through many midnights on the attraction the star held for him, Melchior reasoned that in its narrow ray was the whole emanation of a sun and perhaps of a planetary system; that the secret of foreign worlds and even something of their history was implicit in that light, if one could only read the tale. And he longed to understand, and to know

the far-woven thread of affinity which drew his attention so perennially to this particular orb. On each occasion when he looked, his brain was tantalized by obscure intimations of loveliness and wonder that were still a little beyond the reach of his boldest reveries, of his wildest dreams. And each time, they seemed a trifle nearer, and more attainable than before. And a strange, indeterminate expectancy began to mingle with the eagerness that prompted his evening visits to the balcony.

One midnight, when he was peering through the telescope, he fancied that the star looked a little larger and brighter than usual. Unable to account for this, in a mounting excitement he stared more intently than ever; and was suddenly seized by the unnatural idea that he was peering downward into a vast, vertiginous abyss, rather than toward the zenithal heavens. He felt that the balcony was no longer beneath his feet, but had somehow become inverted; and then, all at once, he was falling from it into the headlong ether, with a million thunders and flames about and behind him. For a brief while, he still seemed to see the star he had been watching, far down in the terrible Cimmerian void; and then he forgot, and could find it no more. There was the sickness of incalculable descent, an ever-swiftening torrent of vertigo not to be borne; and after moments or eons (he could not tell which) the thunders and flames died out in ultimate darkness, in utmost silence; and he no longer knew that he was falling, and no longer retained any sort of sentiencey.

2

When Melchior returned to consciousness, his first impulse was to clutch the arm of the chair in which he had been sitting beneath the telescope. It was the involuntary movement of one who has fallen in a dream. In a moment he realized the absurdity of this impulse; for he was not sitting in a chair at all; and his surroundings bore no manner of resemblance to the nocturnal balcony on which he had been seized by a strange vertigo, and from which he had seemed to fall and lose himself.

He was standing on a road paven with cyclopean blocks of gray stone—a road that ran interminably before him into the vague, tremendous vistas of an inconceivable world. There were low, funereal, drooping trees along the road, with sad-colored foliage and fruits of a deathly violet; and beyond the trees were range on range of monumental obelisks, of terraces and domes, of colossal multiform piles, that reached

away in endless, countless perspectives toward an indistinct horizon. Over all, from an ebon-purple zenith, there fell in rich, unglorious rays the illumination of a blood-red sun. The forms and proportions of the labyrinthine mass of buildings were unlike anything that has been designed in terrestrial architecture; and, for an instant, Melchior was overwhelmed by their number and magnitude, by their monstrosity and bizarriere. Then, as he looked once more, they were no longer monstrous, no longer bizarre; and he knew them for what they were, and knew the world upon whose road his feet were set, and the destination he was to seek, and the part he was fated to play. It all came back to him as inevitably as the actual deeds and impulses of life return to one who has thrown himself obliviously for a while into some dramatic role that is foreign to his real personality. The incidents of his existence as Francis Melchior, though he still recalled them, had become obscure and meaningless and grotesque in the reawakening of a fuller state of entity, with all its train of recovered reminiscences, of revived emotions and sensations. There was no strangeness, only the familiarity of a homecoming, in the fact that he had stepped into another condition of being, with its own environment, with its own past, present and future, all of which would have been incognizably alien to the amateur astronomer who had peered a few moments before at a tiny star remote in sidereal space.

"Of course, I am Antarion," he mused. "Who else could I be?" The language of his thoughts was not English, nor any earthly tongue; but he was not surprised by his knowledge of this language; nor was he surprised when he looked down and saw that he was attired in a costume of somber moth-like red, of a style unknown to any human people or epoch. This costume, and certain differences in his physical personality that would have appeared rather odd a little previously, were quite as he expected them to be. He gave them only a cursory glance, as he reviewed in his mind the circumstances of the life he had now resumed.

He, Antarion, a renowned poet of the land of Charmalos, in the elder world that was known to its living peoples by the name of Phandiom, had gone on a brief journey to a neighboring realm. In the course of this journey, a distressing dream had befallen him—the dream of a tedious, unprofitable life as one Francis Melchior, in a quite unpleasant and peculiar sort of planet, lying somewhere on the further side of the universe. He was unable to recall exactly when and where he had been beset by this dream; and he had no idea how long it had lasted: but at any rate, he was glad to be rid of it, and glad that he was now approach-

ing his native city of Saddoth, where dwelt in her dark and splendid palace of past eons the beautiful Thameera, whom he loved. Now, once more, after the obscure clouding of that dream, his mind was full of the wisdom of Saddoth; and his heart was illumed by a thousand memories of Thameera; and was darkened at whiles by an old anxiety concerning her.

Not without reason had Melchior been fascinated by things antique and by things that are far away. For the world wherein he walked as Antarion was incomputably old, and the ages of its history were too many for remembrance; and the towering obelisks and piles along the paven road were the high tombs, the proud monuments of its immemorial dead, who had come to outnumber infinitely the living. In more than the pomp of earthly kings, the dead were housed in Phandiom; and their cities loomed insuperably vast, with never-ending streets and prodigious spires, above those lesser abodes wherein the living dwelt. And throughout Phandiom the bygone years were a tangible presence, an air that enveloped all; and the people were steeped in the crepuscular gloom of antiquity; and were wise with all manner of accumulated lore; and were subtle in the practise of strange refinements, of erudite perversities, of all that can shroud with artful opulence and grace and variety the bare uncouth cadaver of life, or hide from mortal vision the leering skull of death. And here, in Saddoth, beyond the domes and terraces and columns of the huge necropolis, like a necromantic flower wherein forgotten lilies live again, there bloomed the superb and sorrowful loveliness of Thameera.

3

Melchior, in his consciousness as the poet Antarion, was unable to remember a time when he had not loved Thameera. She had been an ardent passion, an exquisite ideal, a mysterious delight and an enigmatic grief. He had adored her implicitly through all the selenic changes of her moods, in her childish petulance, her passionate or maternal tenderness, her sybilline silence, her merry or macabre whims; and most of all, perhaps, in the obscure sorrows and terrors that overwhelmed her at times.

He and she were the last representatives of noble ancient families; whose untabulated lineage was lost in the crowded cycles of Phandiom. Like all others of their race, they were imbued with the heritage of a complex and decadent culture; and upon their souls the never-lifting

shadow of the necropoli had fallen from birth. In the life of Phandiom, in its atmosphere of elder time, of con-developed art, of epicureanism consummate and already a little moribund, Antarion had found an ample satisfaction for all the instincts of his being. He had lived as an intellectual sybarite; and by virtue of a half-primitive vigor, had not yet fallen upon the spiritual exhaustion and desolation, the dread implacable ennui of racial senescence, that marked so many of his fellows.

Thameera was even more sensitive, more visionary by nature; and hers was the ultimate refinement that is close to an autumnal decay. The influences of the past, which were a source of poetic fruition to Antarion, were turned by her delicate nerves to pain and languor, to horror and oppression. The palace wherein she lived, and the very streets of Saddoth, were filled for her with emanations that welled from the sepulchral reservoirs of death; and the weariness of the innumerable dead was everywhere; and evil or opiate presences came forth from the mausolean vaults, to crush and stifle her with the formless brooding of their wings. Only in the arms of Antarion could she escape them; and only in his kisses could she forget.

Now, after his journey (whose reason he could not quite remember) and after the curious dream in which he had imagined himself as Francis Melchior, Antarion was once more admitted to the presence of Thameera by slaves who were invariably discreet, being tongueless. In the oblique light of beryl and topaz windows, in the mauve and crimson gloom of heavy-folded tapestries, on a floor of marvelous mosaic wrought in ancient cycles, she came forward languidly to greet him. She was fairer than his memories, and paler than a blossom of the catacombs. She was exquisitely frail, voluptuously proud, with hair of a lunar gold and eyes of nocturnal brown that were pierced by fluctuating stars and circled by the dark pearl of sleepless nights. Beauty and love and sadness exhaled from her like a manifold perfume.

"I am glad you have come, Antarion, for I have missed you." Her voice was as gentle as an air that is born among flowering trees, and melancholy as remembered music.

Antarion would have knelt, but she took him by the hand and led him to a couch beneath the intricately figured curtains. There the lovers sat and looked at each other in affectionate silence.

"Are all things well with you, Thameera?" The query was prompted by the anxious divination of love.

"No, all things are not well. Why did you go away? The wings of death and darkness are abroad, they hover more closely than ever; and

shades more fearful than those of the past have fallen upon Saddoth. There have been strange perturbations in the aspect of the skies; and our astronomers, after much study and calculation, have announced the imminent doom of the sun. There remains to us but a single month of light and warmth, and then the sun will go out on the noontide heavens like an extinguished lamp, and eternal night will fall, and the chill of outer space will creep across Phandiom. Our people have gone mad with the predicted horror; and some of them are sunk in despairing apathy, and more have given themselves to frenzied revels and debaucheries. . . . Where have you been, Antarion? In what dream did you lose yourself, that you could forsake me so long?"

Antarion tried to comfort her. "Love is still ours," he said. "And even if the astronomers have read the skies aright, we have a month before us. And a month is much."

"Yes, but there are other perils, Antarion. Haspa the king has looked upon me with eyes of senile desire, and woos me assiduously with gifts, with vows and with threats. It is the sudden, inexorable whim of age and ennui, the caprice of desperation. He is cruel, he is relentless, he is all-powerful."

"I will take you away," said Antarion. "We will flee together, and dwell among the sepulchers and the ruins, where none can find us. And love and ecstasy shall bloom like flowers of scarlet beneath their shadow; and we will meet the everlasting night in each other's arms; and thus we will know the utmost of mortal bliss."

4

Beneath the black midnight that hung above them like an imminence of colossal, unremoving wings, the streets of Saddoth were aflame with a million lights of yellow and cinnabar and cobalt and purple. Along the vast avenues, the gorge-deep alleys, and in and out of the stupendous olden palaces, temples and mansions, there poured the antic revelry, the tumultuous merriment of a night-long masquerade. Every one was abroad, from Haspa the king and his sleek, sybaritic courtiers, to the lowliest mendicants and pariahs; and a rout of extravagant, unheard-of costumes, a melange of fantasies more various than those of an opium dream, seethed and eddied everywhere. As Thameera had said, the people were mad with the menace of doom foretold by the astronomers; and they sought to forget, in a swift and ever-mounting delirium of all the senses, their dread of the nearing night.

Late in the evening, Antarion left by a postern door the tall and gloomy mansion of his forefathers, and wended his way through the hysteric whirling of the throng toward Thameera's palace. He was garbed in apparel of an antique style, such as had not been worn for a score of centuries in Phandiom; and his whole head and face were enveloped in a painted mask designed to represent the peculiar physiognomy of a people now extinct. No one could have recognized him; nor could he, on his part, have recognized many of the revellers he met, no matter how well-known to him, for most of them were disguised in apparel no less *outré*, and wore masks that were whimsical or absurd, or loathsome or laughable beyond conception. There were devils and empresses and deities, there were kings and necromancers from all the far, unfathomed ages of Phandiom, there were monsters of mediæval or prehistoric types, there were things that had never been born or beheld except in the minds of insane decadent artists, seeking to surpass the abnormalities of nature. Even the tomb had been drawn upon for inspiration, and shrouded mummies, worm-gnawed cadavers, promenade among the living. All these masks were the screen of an orgiastic license without precedent or parallel.

All the needful preparations for flight from Saddoth had been made; and Antarion had left minute and careful instructions with his servants regarding certain essential matters. He knew from of old the ruthless, tyrannic temperament of Haspa, knew that the king would brook no opposition to the indulgence of any whim or passion, no matter how momentary. There was no time to be lost in leaving the city with Thameera.

He came by winding devious ways to the garden behind Thameera's palace. There, among the high and spectral lilies of deep or ashen hues, the bowed funereal trees with their fruit of subtle and opiate savor, she awaited him, clad in a costume whose antiquity matched his own, and which was no less impenetrable to recognition. After a brief murmur of greeting, they stole forth together from the garden and joined the oblivious throng. Antarion had feared that Thameera might be watched by the henchmen of Haspa; but there was no evidence of such watching, no one in sight who seemed to lurk or loiter; only the swift movement of an ever-changing crowd, preoccupied with the quest of pleasure. In this crowd, he felt that they were safe.

However, through a scrupulous caution, they allowed themselves to be carried along for awhile in the tide of the city's revel, before they sought the long arterial avenue that led to the gates. They joined in the

singing of fescennine songs, they returned the bachannalian jests that were flung by passers-by, they drank the wines that were proffered them by public urn-bearers, they tarried when the throng tarried, moved when it moved.

Everywhere, there were wildly flaming lights, and the ribaldry of loud voices, and the strident moan or feverous pulsing of musical instruments. There was feasting in the great squares, and the doorways of immemorial houses poured out a flood of illumination, a tumult of laughter and melody, as they offered their hospitality to all who might choose to enter them. And in the huge temples of former eons, delirious rites were done to the gods who stared forth with unchanging eyes of stone and metal to the hopeless heavens; and the priests and worshippers drugged themselves with terrible opiates, and sought the stupefying ecstacy of abandonment to an hysteria both carnal and devout.

At length Antarion and Thameera, by unobtrusive stages, by many windings and turnings, began to approach the gates of Saddoth. For the first time in their history, these gates were unguarded; for, in the general demoralization, the sentinels had stolen away without fear of detection or reproof, to join the universal orgy. Here, in the outlying quarter, there were few people, and only the scattered flotsam of the revels; and the broad open space between the last houses and the city wall was utterly abandoned. No one saw the lovers when they slipped like evanescent shadows through the grim yawning of the gates, and followed the gray road into an outer darkness thronged with the dim bulks of mausoleums and monuments.

Here, the stars that had been blinded by the flaring lights of Saddoth were clearly visible in the burnt-out sky. And presently, as the lovers went on, the two small ashen moons of Phandiom arose from behind the necropoli, and flung the despairing languor of their faint beams on the multitudinous domes and minarets of the dead. And beneath the twin moons, that drew their uncertain light from a dying sun, Antarion and Thameera doffed their masks, and looked at each other in a silence of unutterable love, and shared the first kiss of their month of ultimate delight.

5

For two days and nights, the lovers had fled from Saddoth. They had hidden by daylight among the mausoleums, they had traveled in darkness and by the doubtful glimmering of the moons, on roads that were

little used, since they ran only to age-deserted cities lying in the ulterior tracts of Chärmałos, in a land whose very-soil had long become exhausted, and was now given over to the stealthy encroachment of the desert. And now they had come to their journey's end; for, mounting a low, treeless ridge, they saw below them the ruinous and forgotten roofs of Urbyzaun, which had lain unpeopled for more than a thousand years; and beyond the roofs, the black unlustrous lake surrounded by hills of bare and wave-corroded rock, that had once been the inlet of a great sea.

Here, in the crumbling palace of the emperor Altanoman, whose high, tumultuous glories were now a failing legend, the slaves of Antarion had preceded them, bringing a supply of food and such comforts and luxuries as they would require in the interim before oblivion. And here they were secure from all pursuit; for Haspa; in the driven fever and goaded ennui of his last days, had doubtless turned to the satisfying of some other and less difficult caprice, and had already forgotten Thameera.

And now, for the lovers, began the life that was a brief epitome of all possible delight and despair. And, strangely enough, Thameera lost the vague fears that had tormented her, the dim sorrows that had obsessed, and was wholly happy in the caresses of Antarion. And, since there was so little time in which to express their love, to share their thoughts, their sentiments, their reveries, there was never enough said or enough done between them; and both were blissfully content.

But the swift, relentless days went by; and day by day, the red sun that circled above Phandiom was darkened by a tinge of the coming shadow; and chillness stole upon the quiet air; and the still heavens, where never clouds or winds or bird-wings passed, were ominous of doom. And day by day, Antarion and Thameera saw the dusking of the sun from a ruinous terrace above the dead lake; and night by night, they saw the paling of the ghostly moons. And their love became an intolerable sweetness, a thing too deep and dear to be borne by mortal heart or mortal flesh.

Mercifully, they had lost the strict count of time, and knew not the number of days that had passed, and thought that several more dawns and noons and eves of joyance were before them. They were lying together on a couch in the old palace—a marble couch that the slaves had strewn with luxurious fabrics—and were saying over and over some litany of love, when the sun was overtaken at high noon by the doom astronomers had foretold; when a slow twilight filled the palace, heavier than the umbrage wrought by any cloud, and was followed by a sudden

wave of overwhelming ebon darkness, and the creeping cold of outer space. The slaves of Antarion moaned in the darkness; and the lovers knew that the end of all was at hand; and they clung to each other in despairing rapture, with swift, innumerable kisses, and murmured the supreme ecstasy of their tenderness and their desire; till the cold that had fallen from infinitude became a growing agony, and then a merciful numbness, and then an all-encompassing oblivion.

6

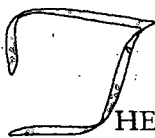
Francis Melchior awoke in his chair beneath the telescope. He shivered, for the air had grown chill; and when he moved, he found that his limbs were strangely stiff, as if he had been exposed to a more rigorous cold than that of the late summer night. The long and curious dream that he had undergone was inexpressibly real to him; and the thoughts, the desires, the fears and despairs of Antarion were still his. Mechanically, rather than through any conscious renewal of the impulses of his earthly self, he fixed his eye to the telescope and looked for the star he had been studying when the premonitory vertigo had seized him. The configuration of the skies had hardly changed, the surrounding constellation was still high in the southeast; but, with a shock that became a veritable stupefaction, he saw that the star itself had disappeared.

Never, though he searched the heavens night after night through the alternation of many seasons, has he been able to find again the little far-off orb that drew him so inexplicably and irresistibly. He bears a double sorrow; and, though he has grown old and gray with the lentor of fruitless years, with the buying and selling of antiques and the study of the stars, Francis Melchior is still a little doubtful as to which is the real dream: his lifetime on earth, or the month in Phandiom below a dying sun, when, as the poet Antarion, he loved the superb and sorrowful beauty of Thameera. And always he is troubled by a dull regret that he should ever have awakened (if awakening it was) from the death that he died in the palace of Altanoman, with Thameera in his arms and Thameera's kisses on his lips.

The late Montague Rhodes James, Provost of Eton College, antiquary and noted authority on medieval and church history, delighted in employing his talent and background in the spinning of frightening tales. Cleverly weaving his web of fear into the structure of modern scenes, M. R. James worked towards those subtile revelations of spectral horror that have made his name a standard for excellence in terror fiction. Though "*A Warning to the Curious*" was written in the twenties, it contains certain unnerving suggestions that may have bearing on the failure of the recent German foe to attempt England's invasion in the forties.

A Warning to the Curious

by M. R. James



THE PLACE on the east coast which the reader is asked to consider is Seaburgh. It is not very different now from what I remember it to have been when I was a child. Marshes intersected by dykes to the south, recalling the early chapters of *Great Expectations*; flat fields to the north, merging into heath; heath, fir woods, and, above all, gorse, inland. A long sea-front and a street: behind that a spacious church of flint, with a broad, solid western tower and a peal of six bells. How well I remember their sound on a hot Sunday in August, as our party went slowly up the white, dusty slope of road towards them, for the church stands at the top of a short, steep incline. They rang with a flat clacking sort of sound on those hot days, but when the air was softer they were mellower too. The railway ran down to its little terminus farther along the same road. There was a gay white windmill just before you came to the station, and another down near the shingle at the south end of the town, and yet others on higher ground to the north. There were cottages of bright red brick with slate roofs . . . but why do I encumber you with these commonplace details? The fact is that they come crowding to the point of the pencil

when it begins to write of Seaburgh. I should like to be sure that I had allowed the right ones to get on to the paper. But I forgot. I have not quite done with the word-painting business yet.

Walk away from the sea and the town, pass the station, and turn up the road on the right. It is a sandy road, parallel with the railway, and if you follow it, it climbs to somewhat higher ground. On your left (you are now going northward) is heath, on your right (the side towards the sea) is a belt of old firs, wind-beaten, thick at the top, with the slope that old seaside trees have; seen on the skyline from the train they would tell you in an instant, if you did not know it, that you were approaching a windy coast. Well, at the top of my little hill, a line of these firs strikes out and runs towards the sea, for there is a ridge that goes that way; and the ridge ends in a rather well-defined mound commanding the level fields of rough grass, and a little knot of fir trees crowns it. And here you may sit on a hot spring day, very well content to look at blue sea, white windmills, red cottages, bright green grass, church tower, and distant martello tower on the south.

As I have said, I began to know Seaburgh as a child; but a gap of a good many years separates my early knowledge from that which is more recent. Still it keeps its place in my affections, and any tales of it that I pick up have an interest for me. One such tale is this: it came to me in a place very remote from Seaburgh, and quite accidentally, from a man whom I had been able to oblige—enough in his opinion to justify his making me his confidant to this extent.

I know all that country more or less (he said). I used to go to Seaburgh pretty regularly for golf in the spring. I generally put up at the "Bear," with a friend—Henry Long it was, you knew him perhaps—("Slightly," I said) and we used to take a sitting-room and be very happy there. Since he died I haven't cared to go there. And I don't know that I should anyhow after the particular thing that happened on our last visit.

It was in April, 19—, we were there, and by some chance we were almost the only people in the hotel. So the ordinary public rooms were practically empty, and we were the more surprised when, after dinner, our sitting-room door opened, and a young man put his head in. We were aware of this young man. He was rather a rabbity anæmic subject—light hair and light eyes—but not unpleasing. So when he said: "I beg your pardon, is this a private room?" we did not growl and say: "Yes, it is," but Long said, or I did—no matter which: "Please come in." "Oh,

may I?" he said, and seemed relieved. Of course it was obvious that he wanted company; and as he was a reasonable kind of person—not the sort to bestow his whole family history on you—we urged him to make himself at home. "I dare say you find the other rooms rather bleak," I said. Yes, he did: but it was really too good of us, and so on. That being got over, he made some pretence of reading a book. Long was playing Patience, I was writing. It became plain to me after a few minutes that this visitor of ours was in rather a state of fidgets or nerves, which communicated itself to me, and so I put away my writing and turned to at engaging him in talk.

After some remarks, which I forget, he became rather confidential. "You'll think it very odd of me" (this was the sort of way he began), "but the fact is I've had something of a shock." Well, I recommended a drink of some cheering kind, and we had it. The waiter coming in made an interruption (and I thought our young man seemed very jumpy when the door opened), but after a while he got back to his woes again. There was nobody he knew in the place, and he did happen to know who we both were (it turned out there was some common acquaintance in town), and really he did want a word of advice, if we didn't mind. Of course we both said: "By all means," or "Not at all," and Long put away his cards. And we settled down to hear what his difficulty was.

"It began," he said, "more than a week ago, when I bicycled over to Froston, only about five or six miles, to see the church; I'm very much interested in architecture, and it's got one of those pretty porches with niches and shields. I took a photograph of it, and then an old man who was tidying up in the churchyard came and asked if I'd care to look into the church. I said yes, and he produced a key and let me in. There wasn't much inside, but I told him it was a nice little church, and he kept it very clean, 'but,' I said, 'the porch is the best part of it.' We were just outside the porch then, and he said, 'Ah, yes, that is a nice porch; and do you know, sir, what's the meanin' of that coat of arms there?'"

"It was the one with the three crowns, and though I'm not much of a herald, I was able to say yes, I thought it was the old arms of the kingdom of East Anglia.

"That's right, sir," he said, "and do you know the meanin' of them three crowns that's on it?"

"I said I'd no doubt it was known, but I couldn't recollect to have heard it myself."

"Well, then," he said, "for all you're a scholar, I can tell you some-

thing you don't know. Them's the three 'oly crowns what was buried in the ground near by the coast to keep the Germans from landing—ah, I can see you don't believe that. But I tell you, if it hadn't been for one of them 'oly crowns bein' there still, them Germans would a landed here time and again, they would. Landed with their ships, and killed man, woman and child in their beds. Now then, that's the truth what I'm telling you, that is; and if you don't believe me, you ast the rector. There he comes: you ast him, I says.'

"I looked round, and there was the rector, a nice-looking old man, coming up the path; and before I could begin assuring my old man, who was getting quite excited, that I didn't disbelieve him, the rector struck in, and said: 'What's all this about, John? Good day to you, sir. Have you been looking at our little church?'

"So then there was a little talk which allowed the old man to calm down, and then the rector asked him again what was the matter.

"'Oh,' he said, 'it warn't nothink, only I was telling this gentleman he'd ought to ast you about them 'oly crowns.'

"'Ah, yes, to be sure,' said the rector, 'that's a very curious matter, isn't it? But I don't know whether the gentleman is interested in our old stories, eh?'

"'Oh, he'll be interested fast enough,' says the old man, 'he'll put his confidence in what you tells him, sir; why, you known William Ager yourself, father and son too.'

"Then I put in a word to say how much I should like to hear all about it, and before many minutes I was walking up the village street with the rector, who had one or two words to say to parishioners, and then to the rectory, where he took me into his study. He had made out, on the way, that I really was capable of taking an intelligent interest in a piece of folk-lore, and not quite the ordinary tripper. So he was very willing to talk, and it is rather surprising to me that the particular legend he told me has not made its way into print before. His account of it was this: 'There has always been a belief in these parts in the three holy crowns. The old people say they were buried in different places near the coast to keep off the Danes or the French or the Germans. And they say that one of the three was dug up a long time ago, and another has disappeared by the encroaching of the sea, and one's still left doing its work, keeping off invaders. Well, now, if you have read the ordinary guides and histories of this county, you will have remember perhaps that in 1687 a crown, which was said to be the crown of Redwald, King of East Angles, was dug up at Rendle-

sham, and alas! alas! melted down before it was even properly described or drawn. Well, Rendlesham isn't on the coast, but it isn't so very far inland, and it's on a very important line of access. And I believe that is the crown which the people mean when they say that one has been dug up. Then on the south you don't want me to tell you where there was a Saxon royal palace which is now under the sea, eh? Well, there was the second crown, I take it. And up beyond these two, they say, lies the third.'

"Do they say where it is?' of course I asked.

"He said, 'Yes, indeed, they do, but they don't tell,' and his manner did not encourage me to put the obvious question. Instead of that I waited a moment, and said: 'What did the old man mean when he said you knew William Ager, as if that had something to do with the crowns?'

"To be sure,' he said, 'now that's another curious story. These Agers—it's a very old name in these parts, but I can't find that they were ever people of quality or big owners—these Agers say, or said, that their branch of the family were the guardians of the last crown. A certain old Nathaniel Ager was the first one I knew—I was born and brought up quite near here—and he, I believe, camped out at the place during the whole of the war of 1870. William, his son, did the same, I know, during the South African War. And young William, *his* son, who has only died fairly recently, took lodgings at the cottage nearest the spot, and I've no doubt hastened his end, for he was a consumptive, by exposure and night watching. And he was the last of that branch. It was a dreadful grief to him to think that he was the last, but he could do nothing, the only relations at all near to him were in the colonies. I wrote letters for him to them imploring them to come over on business very important to the family, but there has been no answer. So the last of the holy crowns, if it's there, has no guardian now.'

"That was what the rector told me, and you can fancy how interesting I found it. The only thing I could think of when I left him was how to hit upon the spot where the crown was supposed to be. I wish I'd left it alone.

"But there was a sort of fate in it, for as I bicycled back past the churchyard wall my eye caught a fairly new gravestone, and on it was the name of William Ager. Of course I got off and read it. It said 'of this parish, died at Seaburgh, 19—, aged 28.' There it was, you see. A little judicious questioning in the right place, and I should at least find the cottage nearest the spot. Only I didn't quite know what was the

right place to begin my questioning at. Again there was fate: it took me to the curiosity-shop down that way—you know—and I turned over some old books, and, if you please, one was a prayer-book of 1740 odd, in a rather handsome binding—I'll just go and get it, it's in my room."

He left us in a state of some surprise, but we had hardly time to exchange any remarks when he was back, panting, and handed us the book opened at the fly-leaf, on which was, in a straggly hand:

"Nathaniel Ager is my name and England is my nation,
Seaburgh is my dwelling-place and Christ is my Salvation,
When I am dead and in my Grave, and all my bones are rotten,
I hope the Lord will think on me when I am quite forgotten."

This poem was dated 1754, and there were many more entries of Agers, Nathaniel, Frederick, William, and so on, ending with William, 19—.

"You see," he said, "anybody would call it the greatest bit of luck. I did, but I don't now. Of course I asked the shopman about William Ager, and of course he happened to remember that he lodged in a cottage in the North Field and died there. This was just chalking the road for me. I knew which the cottage must be: there is only one sizable one about there. The next thing was to scrape some sort of acquaintance with the people, and I took a walk that way at once. A dog did the business for me: he made at me so fiercely that they had to run out and beat him off, and then naturally begged my pardon, and we got into talk. I had only to bring up Ager's name, and pretend I knew, or thought I knew, something of him, and then the woman said how sad it was him dying so young, and she was sure it came of him spending the night out of doors in the cold weather. Then I had to say: 'Did he go out on the sea at night?' and she said: 'Oh, no, it was on the hillock yonder with the trees on it.' And there I was.

"I know something about digging in these barrows: I've opened many of them in the down country. But that was with owner's leave, and in broad daylight and with men to help. I had to prospect very carefully here before I put a spade in: I couldn't trench across the mound, and with those old firs growing there I knew there would be awkward tree roots. Still the soil was very light and sandy and easy, and there was a rabbit hole or so that might be developed into a sort of tunnel. The going out and coming back at odd hours to the hotel was going to be the awkward part. When I made up my mind about

the way to excavate I told the people that I was called away for a night, and I spent it out there. I made my tunnel: I won't bore you with the details of how I supported it and filled it in when I'd done, but the main thing is that I got the crown."

Naturally we both broke out into exclamations of surprise and interest. I for one had long known about the finding of the crown at Rendlesham and had often lamented its fate. No one has ever seen an Anglo-Saxon crown—at least no one had. But our man gazed at us with a rueful eye. "Yes," he said, "and the worst of it is I don't know how to put it back."

"Put it back?" we cried out. "Why, my dear sir, you've made one of the most exciting finds ever heard of in this country. Of course it ought to go to the Jewel House at the Tower. What's your difficulty? If you're thinking about the owner of the land, and treasure-trove, and all that, we can certainly help you through. Nobody's going to make a fuss about technicalities in a case of this kind."

Probably more was said, but all he did was to put his face in his hands, and mutter: "I don't know how to put it back."

At last Long said: "You'll forgive me, I hope, if I seem impertinent, but are you *quite* sure you've got it?" I was wanting to ask much the same question myself, for of course the story did seem a lunatic's dream when one thought over it. But I hadn't quite dared to say what might hurt the poor young man's feelings. However, he took it quite calmly—really, with the calm of despair, you might say. He sat up and said: "Oh, yes, there's no doubt of that: I have it here in my room, locked up in my bag. You can come and look at it if you like: I won't offer to bring it here."

We were not likely to let the chance slip. We went with him; his room was only a few doors off. The boots was just collecting shoes in the passage; or so we thought: afterwards we were not sure. Our visitor—his name was Paxton—was in a worse state of shivers than before, and went hurriedly into the room, and beckoned us after him, turned on the light, and shut the door carefully. Then he unlocked his kit-bag, and produced a bundle of clean pocket-handkerchiefs in which something was wrapped, laid it on the bed, and undid it. I can now say I *have* seen an actual Anglo-Saxon crown. It was of silver—as the Rendlesham one is always said to have been—it was set with some gems, mostly antique intaglios and cameos, and was of rather plain, almost rough workmanship. In fact, it was like those you see on the coins and in the manuscripts. I found no reason to think it was later than the

ninth century. I was intensely interested, of course, and I wanted to turn it over in my hands, but Paxton prevented me. "Don't *you* touch it," he said, "I'll do that." And with a sigh that was, I declare to you, dreadful to hear, he took it up and turned it about so that we could see every part of it. "Seen enough?" he said at last, and we nodded. He wrapped it up and locked it in his bag, and stood looking at us dumbly. "Come back to our room," Long said, "and tell us what the trouble is." He thanked us, and said: "Will you go first and see if—if the coast is clear?" That wasn't very intelligible, for our proceedings hadn't been, after all, very suspicious, and the hotel, as I said, was practically empty. However, we were beginning to have inklings of—we didn't know what, and anyhow nerves are infectious. So we did go, first peering out as we opened the door, and fancying (I found we both had the fancy) that a shadow, or more than a shadow—but it made no sound—passed from before us to one side as we came out into the passage. "It's all right," we whispered to Paxton—whispering seemed the proper tone—and we went, with him between us, back to our sitting-room. I was preparing, when we got there, to be ecstatic about the unique interest of what we had seen, but when I looked at Paxton I saw that would be terribly out of place, and I left it to him to begin.

"What *is* to be done?" was his opening. Long thought it right (as he explained to me afterwards) to be obtuse, and said: "Why not find out who the owner of the land is, and inform—" "Oh, no, no!" Paxton broke in impatiently, "I beg your pardon: you've been very kind, but don't you see it's *got* to go back, and I daren't be there at night, and daytime's impossible. Perhaps, though, you don't see: well, then, the truth is that I've never been alone since I touched it." I was beginning some fairly stupid comment, but Long caught my eye, and I stopped. Long said: "I think I do see, perhaps: but wouldn't it be—a relief—to tell us a little more clearly what the situation is?"

Then it all came out: Paxton looked over his shoulder and beckoned to us to come nearer to him, and began speaking in a low voice: we listened most intently, of course, and compared notes afterwards, and I wrote down our version, so I am confident I have what he told us almost word for word. He said: "It began when I was first prospecting, and put me off again and again. There was always somebody—a man—standing by one of the firms. This was in daylight, you know. He was never in front of me. I always saw him with the tail of my eye on the left or the right, and he was never there when I looked straight for him. I would lie down for quite a long time and take careful observations,

and make sure there was no one, and then when I got up and began prospecting again, there he was. And he began to give me hints, besides; for wherever I put that prayer-book—short of locking it up, which I did at last—when I came back to my room it was always out on my table open at the fly-leaf where the names are, and one of my razors across it to keep it open. I'm sure he just can't open my bag, or something more—would have happened. You see, he's light and weak, but all the same I daren't face him. Well, then, when I was making the tunnel, of course it was worse, and if I hadn't been so keen I should have dropped the whole thing and run. It was like someone scraping at my back all the time: I thought for a long time it was only soil dropping on me, but as I got nearer the—the crown, it was unmistakable. And when I actually laid it bare and got my fingers into the ring of it and pulled it out, there came a sort of cry behind me—oh, I can't tell you how desolate it was! And horribly threatening too. It spoilt all my pleasure in my find—cut it off that moment. And if I hadn't been the wretched fool I am, I should have put the thing back and left it. But I didn't. The rest of the time was just awful. I had hours to get through before I could decently come back to the hotel. First I spent time filling up my tunnel and covering my tracks, and all the while he was there trying to thwart me. Sometimes, you know, you see him, and sometimes you don't, just as he pleases, I think: he's there, but he has some power over your eyes. Well, I wasn't off the spot very long before sunrise, and then I had to get to the junction for Seaburgh, and take a train back. And though it was daylight fairly soon, I don't know if that made it much better. There were always hedges, or gorsebushes, or park fences along the road—some sort of cover, I mean—and I was never easy for a second. And then when I began to meet people going to work, they always looked behind me very strangely: it might have been that they were surprised at seeing anyone so early; but I didn't think it was only that, and I don't now: they didn't look exactly at *me*. And the porter at the train was like that too. And the guard held open the door after I'd got into the carriage—just as he would if there was somebody else coming, you know. Oh, you may be very sure it isn't my fancy," he said with a dull sort of laugh. Then he went on: "And even if I do get it put back, he won't forgive me: I can tell that. And I was so happy a fortnight ago." He dropped into a chair, and I believe he began to cry.

We didn't know what to say, but we felt we must come to the rescue somehow, and so—it really seemed the only thing—we said if he was

so set on putting the crown back in its place, we would help him. And I must say that after what we had heard it did seem the right thing. If these horrid consequences had come on this poor man, might there not really be something in the original idea of the crown having some curious power bound up with it, to guard the coast? At least, that was my feeling, and I think it was Long's too. Our offer was very welcome to Paxton, anyhow. When could we do it? It was nearing half-past ten. Could we contrive to make a late walk plausible to the hotel people that very night? We looked out of the window: there was a brilliant full moon—the Paschal moon. Long undertook to tackle the boots and propitiate him. He was to say that we should not be much over the hour, and if we did find it so pleasant that we stopped out a bit longer we would see that he didn't lose by sitting up. Well, we were pretty regular customers of the hotel, and did not give much trouble, and were considered by the servants to be not under the mark in the way of tips; and so the boots *was* propitiated, and let us out on to the seafront, and remained, as we heard later, looking after us. Paxton had a large coat over his arm, under which was the wrapped-up crown.

So we were off on this strange errand before we had time to think how very much out of the way it was. I have told this part quite shortly on purpose, for it really does represent the haste with which we settled our plan and took action. "The shortest way is up the hill and through the churchyard," Paxton said, as we stood a moment before the hotel looking up and down the front. There was nobody about—nobody at all. Seaburgh out of the season is an early, quiet place. "We can't go along the dyke by the cottage, because of the dog," Paxton also said, when I pointed to what I thought a shorter way along the front and across two fields. The reason he gave was good enough. We went up the road to the church, and turned in at the churchyard gate. I confess to having thought that there might be some lying there who might be conscious of our business: but if it was so, they were also conscious that one who was on their side, so to say, had us under surveillance, and we saw no sign of them. But under observation we felt we were, as I have never felt it at another time. Specially was it so when we passed out of the churchyard into a narrow path with close high hedges, through which we hurried as Christian did through that Valley; and so got out into open fields. Then along hedges, though I would sooner have been in the open, where I could see if anyone was visible behind me; over a gate or two, and then a swerve to the left, taking us up on the ridge which ended in that mound.

As we neared it, Henry Long felt, and I felt too, that there were what I can only call dim presences waiting for us, as well as a far more actual one attending us. Of Paxton's agitation all this time I can give you no adequate picture: he breathed like a hunted beast, and we could not either of us look at his face. How he would manage when we got to the very place we had not troubled to think: he had seemed so sure that that would not be difficult. Nor was it. I never saw anything like the dash with which he flung himself at a particular spot in the side of the mound, and tore at it, so that in a very few minutes the greater part of his body was out of sight. We stood holding the coat and that bundle of handkerchiefs, and looking, very fearfully, I must admit, about us. There was nothing to be seen: a line of dark firs behind us made one skyline, more trees and the church tower half a mile off on the right, cottages, and a windmill on the horizon on the left, calm sea dead in front, faint barking of a dog at a cottage on a gleaming dyke between us and it: full moon making that path we know across the sea: the eternal whisper of the Scotch firs just above us, and of the sea in front. Yet, in all this quiet, an acute, an acrid consciousness of a restrained hostility very near us, like a dog on a leash that might be let go at any moment.

Paxton pulled himself out of the hole, and stretched a hand back to us. "Give it to me," he whispered, "unwrapped." We pulled off the handkerchiefs, and he took the crown. The moonlight just fell on it as he snatched it. We had not ourselves touched that bit of metal, and I have thought since that it was just as well. In another moment Paxton was out of the hole again and busy shoveling back the soil with hands that were already bleeding. He would have none of our help, though. It was much the longest part of the job to get the place to look undisturbed: yet—I don't know how—he made a wonderful success of it. At least he was satisfied, and we turned back.

We were a couple of hundred yards from the hill when Long suddenly said to him: "I say, you've left your coat there. That won't do. See?" And I certainly did see it—the long dark overcoat lying where the tunnel had been. Paxton had not stopped, however: he only shook his head, and held up the coat on his arm. And when we joined him, he said, without any excitement, but as if nothing mattered any more: "That wasn't my coat." And, indeed, when we looked back again, that dark thing was not to be seen.

Well, we got out on to the road, and came rapidly back that way. It

was well before twelve when we got in, trying to put a good face on it, and saying—Long and I—what a lovely night it was for a walk. The boots was on the look-out for us, and we made remarks like that for his edification as we entered the hotel. He gave another look up and down the sea-front before he locked the front door, and said: "You didn't meet many people about, I s'pose, sir?" "No, indeed, not a soul," I said; at which I remember Paxton looked oddly at me. "Only I thought I see someone turn up the station road after you gentlemen," said the boots. "Still, you was three together, and I don't suppose he meant mischief." I didn't know what to say; Long merely said "Good-night," and we went off upstairs, promising to turn out all lights, and to go to bed in a few minutes.

Back in our room, we did our very best to make Paxton take a cheerful view. "There's the crown safe back," we said; "very likely you'd have done better not to touch it" (and he heavily assented to that), "but no real harm has been done, and we shall never give this away to anyone who would be so mad as to go near it. Besides, don't you feel better yourself? I don't mind confessing," I said, "that on the way there I was very much inclined to take your view about—well, about being followed; but going back, it wasn't at all the same thing, was it?" No, it wouldn't do: "*You've* nothing to trouble yourselves about," he said, "but I'm not forgiven. I've got to pay for that miserable sacrilege still. I know what you are going to say. The Church might help. Yes, but it's the body that has to suffer. It's true I'm not feeling that he's waiting outside for me just now. But——" Then he stopped. Then he turned to thanking us, and we put him off as soon as we could. And naturally we pressed him to use our sitting-room next day, and said we should be glad to go out with him. Or did he play golf, perhaps? Yes, he did, but he didn't think he should care about that to-morrow. Well, we recommended him to get up late and sit in our room in the morning while we were playing, and we would have a walk later in the day. He was very submissive and *piano* about it all: ready to do just what we thought best, but clearly quite certain in his own mind that what was coming could not be averted or palliated. You'll wonder why we didn't insist on accompanying him to his home and seeing him safe into the care of brothers or someone. The fact was he had nobody. He had had a flat in town, but lately he had made up his mind to settle for a time in Sweden, and he had dismantled his flat and shipped off his belongings, and was whiling away a fortnight or three weeks before

he made a start. Anyhow, we didn't see what we could do better than sleep on it—or not sleep very much, as was my case—and see what we felt like tomorrow morning.

We felt very different, Long and I, on as beautiful an April morning as you could desire; and Paxton also looked very different when we saw him at breakfast. "The first approach to a decent night I seem ever to have had," was what he said. But he was going to do as we had settled: stay in probably all the morning, and come out with us later. We went to the links; we met some other men and played with them in the morning, and had lunch there rather early, so as not to be late back. All the same, the snares of death overtook him.

Whether it could have been prevented, I don't know. I think he would have been got at somehow, do what we might. Anyhow, this is what happened.

We went straight up to our room. Paxton was there, reading quite peaceably. "Ready to come out shortly?" said Long; "say in half an hour's time?" "Certainly," he said: and I said we would change first, and perhaps have baths, and call for him in half an hour. I had my bath first, and went and lay down on my bed, and slept for about ten minutes. We came out of our rooms at the same time, and went together to the sitting-room. Paxton wasn't there—only his book. Nor was he in his room, nor in the downstairs rooms. We shouted for him. A servant came out and said: "Why, I thought you gentlemen was gone out already, and so did the other gentleman. He heard you a-calling from the path there, and run out in a hurry, and I looked out of the coffee-room window, but I didn't see you. 'Owever, he run off down the beach that way."

Without a word we ran that way too—it was the opposite direction to that of last night's expedition. It wasn't quite four o'clock, and the day was fair, though not so fair as it had been, so there was really no reason, you'd say, for anxiety: with people about, surely a man couldn't come to much harm.

But something in our look as we ran out must have struck the servant, for she came out on the steps, and pointed, and said, "Yes, that's the way he went." We ran on as far as the top of the shingle bank, and there pulled up. There was a choice of ways: past the houses on the sea-front, or along the sand at the bottom of the beach, which, the tide being now out, was fairly broad. Or of course we might keep along the shingle between these two tracks and have some view of both

of them; only that was heavy going. We chose the sand, for that was the loneliest, and someone *might* come to harm there without being seen from the public path.

Long said he saw Paxton some distance ahead, running and waving his stick, as if he wanted to signal to people who were on ahead of him. I couldn't be sure: one of these sea-mists was coming up very quickly from the south. There was someone, that's all I could say. And there were tracks on the sand as of someone running who wore shoes; and there were other tracks made before those—for the shoes sometimes trod in them and interfered with them—of someone not in shoes. Oh, of course, it's only my word you've got to take for all this: Long's dead, we'd no time or means to make sketches or take casts, and the next tide washed everything away. All we could do was to notice these marks as we hurried on. But there they were over and over again, and we had no doubt whatever that what we saw was the track of a bare foot, and one that showed more bones than flesh.

The notion of Paxton running after—after anything like this, and supposing it to be the friends he was looking for, was very dreadful to us. You can guess what we fancied: how the thing he was following might stop suddenly and turn round on him, and what sort of face it would show, half-seen at first in the mist—which all the while was getting thicker and thicker. And as I ran on wondering how the poor wretch could have been lured into mistaking that other thing for us, I remembered his saying, "He has some power over your eyes." And then I wondered what the end would be, for I had no hope now that the end could be averted, and—well, there is no need to tell all the dismal and horrid thoughts that flitted through my head as we ran on into the mist. It was uncanny, too, that the sun should still be bright in the sky and we could see nothing. We could only tell that we were now past the houses and had reached that gap there is between them and the old martello tower. When you are past the tower, you know, there is nothing but shingle for a long way—not a house, not a human creature, just that spit of land, or rather shingle, with the river on your right and the sea on your left.

But just before that, just by the martello tower, you remember there is the old battery, close to the sea. I believe there are only a few blocks of concrete left now: the rest has all been washed away, but at this time there was a lot more, though the place was a ruin. Well, when we got there, we clambered to the top as quick as we could to take

breath and look over the shingle in front if by chance the mist would let us see anything. But a moment's rest we must have. We had run a mile at least. Nothing whatever was visible ahead of us, and we were just turning by common consent to get down and run hopelessly on, when we heard what I can only call a laugh: and if you can understand what I mean by a breathless, a lungless laugh, you have it: but I don't suppose you can. It came from below, and swerved away into the mist. That was enough. We bent over the wall. Paxton was there at the bottom.

You don't need to be told that he was dead. His tracks showed that he had run along the side of the battery, had turned sharp round the corner of it, and, small doubt of it, must have dashed straight into the open arms of someone who was waiting there. His mouth was full of sand and stones and his teeth and jaws were broken to bits. I only glanced once at his face.

At the same moment, just as we were scrambling down from the battery to get to the body, we heard a shout, and saw a man running down the bank of the martello tower. He was the caretaker stationed there, and his keen old eyes had managed to descry through the mist that something was wrong. He had seen Paxton fall, and had seen us a moment after, running up—fortunate this, for otherwise we could hardly have escaped suspicion of being concerned in the dreadful business. Had he, we asked, caught sight of anybody attacking our friend? He could not be sure.

We sent him off for help, and stayed by the dead man till they came with a stretcher. It was then that we traced out how he had come, on the narrow fringe of sand under the battery wall. The rest was shingle, and it was hopelessly impossible to tell whither the other had gone.

What were we to say at the inquest? It was a duty, we felt, not to give up, there and then, the secret of the crown, to be published in every paper. I don't know how much you would have told; but what we did agree upon was this: to say that we had only made acquaintance with Paxton the day before, and that he had told us he was under some apprehension of danger at the hands of a man called William Ager. Also that we had seen some other tracks besides Paxton's when we followed him along the beach. But of course by that time everything was gone from the sands.

No one had any knowledge, fortunately, of any William Ager living in the district. The evidence of the man at the martello tower freed us

A WARNING TO THE CURIOUS

from all suspicion. All that could be done was to return a verdict of wilful murder by some person or persons unknown.

Paxton was so totally without connections that all the inquiries that were subsequently made ended in a No Thoroughfare. And I have never been at Seaburgh, or even near it, since.

The talented author of "Slan" and "The Weapon Makers" suggests that offense may still be the best form of defense—even on Eternity's scale.

Defense

by A. E. Van Vogt



IN THE BOWELS of the dead planet, tired old machinery stirred. Pale tubes flickered with uneven life, and slowly, reluctantly, a main switch was wheezed out of its negative into its positive position.

There was a hissing, fusing scabbering of metal as the weary copper alloy sagged before a surge of mighty power. The metal stiffened like human muscles subjected to the intolerable shock of electric current, and then with a lurch the switch dissolved in flame and settled with a thud into the dust of an unswept floor.

But before it died it succeeded in starting a wheel turning.

The texture of the ancient silence of the chamber was changed now. The wheel spun lazily on a scabrous cushion of oil, that, sealed off as it had been, had survived a million years. Three times the wheel made its rounds, and then its support crumbled to the floor. The shapeless mass that had been a wheel ended up against a wall, half-powder, half dent and all useless.

Before it died, the wheel spun a shaft that opened a tiny hole at the bottom of a pile of uranium. In the passageway below the hole, other uranium gleamed a dull silvery brightness.

With a cosmic breathlessness, the two piles of metal regarded each other. They stirred. The life that flowed between them needed no ges-

tation period. One look, and they changed to pure fire. What had been solid metal liquefied. The upper flushed down upon the lower.

The flaming mass cascaded along a channel and into a special chamber. There, coiling back upon itself, it simmered and seethed—and waited.

It warmed those cold, insulated walls, and that set off an electric current. Fateful current pulsing silently through the caves of a dead world.

In all the chambers of an interlocking system of underground forts, voices spoke. The messages whispered hoarsely from receivers, in a language so long forgotten that even the echoes mocked the meaning. In a thousand rooms, voices from an incredibly remote past spoke into the silence, waited for response, and, receiving none, accepted that mindless stillness as assent.

In a thousand rooms, then, switches plunged home, wheels spun, uranium flowed into specially built chambers. There was a pause while a final process ran its course. Electronic machines asked each other wordless questions.

A pointer pointed.

"There?" asked a tube, insistently. "From there?"

The pointer held steady.

The questioning tube, having waited its specified time, closed a relay.

"There," it said positively to a thousand waiting-in-line electronic devices. "The object that is approaching has definitely come from *there!*"

The thousand receptors were calm.

"Ready?" they asked.

In the mechanism chambers behind the seething uranium chambers, lights laconically shrugged their readiness.

The reply was curt, an ultimate command.

"*Fire!*"

When they were five hundred miles from the surface Peters, pale and intense, turned to Grayson.

"What the hell," he asked violently, "was that?"

"What? I wasn't looking."

"I'll swear I saw flashes of fire leap up from down there. So many I couldn't count them. And then I had the impression of something passing us in the dark."

Grayson shook his head pityingly. "So the little boogies have got

you at last, pal. Can't take the tension of the first attempt to land on the moon. Relax, boy, relax. We're almost there."

"But I'll swear——"

"Nuts!"

More than 238,000 miles behind them, the earth roiled and shook as a thousand super-atomic bombs exploded in one continuous barrage of mushrooming thunder.

Instantly, the mist spread throughout the stratosphere, blotting out the details of catastrophe from the watching stars.

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